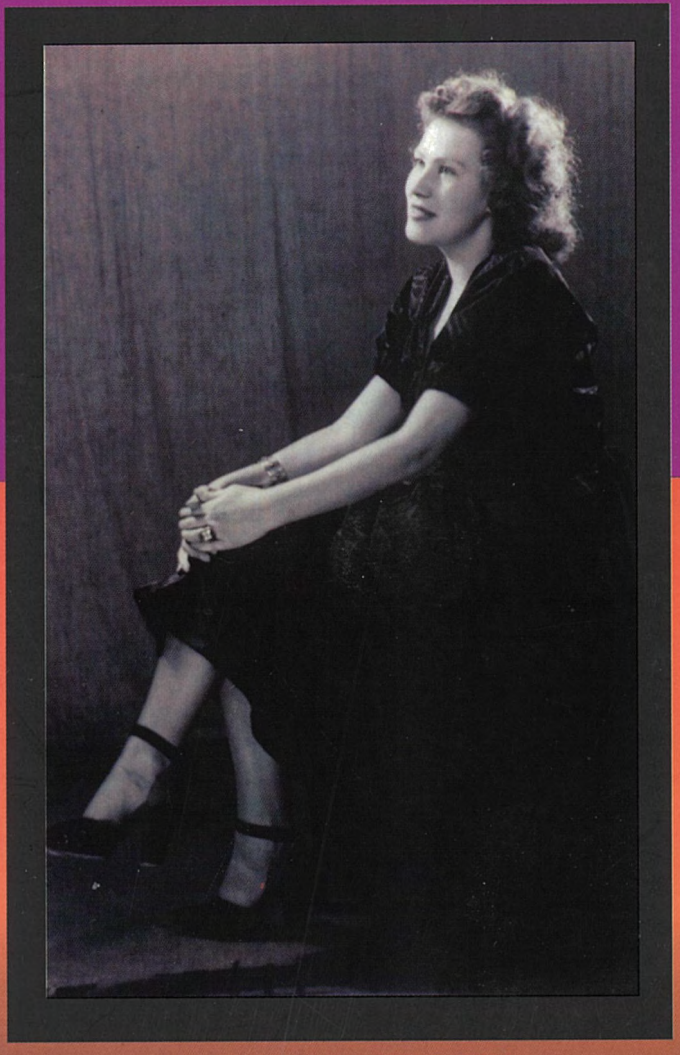
BANISHED *from the* HOMELAND



A TRUE STORY

Crissa Constantine

BANISHED FROM THE HOMELAND

by

Crissa Constantine

eShore

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To my mother,
my late father,
and to all victims of war

This is a true story, but the names of most of the individuals have been changed for the sake of privacy. These are: Sonya, Karl, Lydia, Evald, Albert, Lara, Aunt Lara, Uncle John, Alex, Uncle Thomas, Uncle Ivar, Inge, Wanda, Hilde, Greta, Adam, Paul, Johann, Harald, Erna, Mart, Lennart, Monsieur Deneuve, Mr. and Mrs. Smith, Jean, George, Evangelos, Elektra, and Karin.

All geographical place names are authentic except for the town of Kadri.

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Tallinn, Estonia

Chapter One

I was so happy to be sitting in the middle of Papa's giant wheat field and I knew that no matter how many times they would call my name they would never find me because Mama told me that my hair had exactly the same bleached gold color as the wheat. I didn't want to go back to the house for lunch because there were so many exciting things to do outside.

I stared at all the gorgeous colors around me. The bright scarlet poppies scattered here and there were swaying slightly as if they were talking to the wheat stalks and the deep blue cornflowers looked like stars. I dearly wanted to have a golden dress with red and blue flowers all over it.

I touched the poppy petals, they felt like butterfly wings. The wheat and the cornflowers felt like rough silk.

A funny fat bug crawled toward me on the ground. He had blue and green stripes on his back and his legs were too short, so he swayed from side to side the way the grown-ups did when they were drunk. I wondered if he knew where he was going because he looked totally lost.

The wheat whispered to me that this was heaven and the royal blue sky just had a few whitish-grey clouds in it. I was sure God was watching me from one of those clouds because I could almost see his face up there. In church they told me that I would go to heaven one day if I would always be a good little girl and I felt that I was there already. Papa's estate was the most beautiful place in Estonia.

I wanted to go home and make a painting of the field, but not before going to look for wild strawberries, so I picked up my basket and started walking toward our big forest. There were usually lots of strawberries in there when the weather was lovely and warm and I knew I could wade into the little lake in the middle of the forest and splash myself with cool water if I felt too hot.

"Sonya! Sonya!" I turned my head sharply toward our house. Mama was calling me, but she didn't see me and I was glad because I was not hungry. How can anyone be hungry in heaven?

My head was not too far above the level of the wheat, so I thought I would be able to walk over to the forest without being detected. I walked quickly and checked back once in a while to see if anyone was coming to look for me.

No one came.

I arrived at the edge of the forest and took several deep breaths to inhale the cool perfume that wafted down from the huge evergreens. I knew the lake would be a wonderful and refreshing place to go before picking berries.

I walked on the soft trail covered with spruce needles and soon reached the clearing close to the lake. I stopped suddenly and looked in amazement at some strange people who all had bluish-black hair and brown skin. I only saw people like that in the paintings of Grandmama's enormous bible; it had heavy wooden covers and a padlock. There were also two old and worn-out-looking horses drinking water at the edge of the lake and there was a disgusting smell of rotten meat wafting over from the smoky, crackling campfire. Who were these people? Should I have gone home immediately to tell Mama and Papa about them? I wondered if they would try to stop me and even hurt me.

A woman approached me. I was frightened, but since she was smiling I decided to wait for a few minutes. "Hello, little girl. I not hurt you. Wait, I read your palm and tell you what happens to you in your life." I stared at her greyish-yellow, jagged teeth as she spoke broken Estonian with a hoarse voice. She looked like one of those aggressive black birds that hopped around our house in the deep

winter snow. In January, Mama was kind enough to throw small pieces of raw bloody meat to them and they devoured everything. When they flew away the snow looked as if an animal had died on it. They were awful birds, and this strange woman had the same intense, furious-looking eyes and beaked nose. She wore a faded purple dress that looked as if an angry dog had tried to tear it apart and her brown feet were bare.

I looked up at her oily brown face again; some stringy strands of hair fell over her right eye and she brushed them back with her hand. The silvery bracelets she had on each arm made an eerie jingling noise as she touched her face.

She was still smiling, so I presented both palms to her. She studied my left one for a few minutes while I wondered what she was thinking.

Gradually, her smile disappeared and was replaced by a scowl. In a husky, low voice she said, "Very clear. An evil power forces you to leave this country all by yourself. You never come back. Never!"

I gasped sharply and was instantly overcome by dizziness and nausea. My legs trembled, but I forced myself to run toward home as fast as I could. I dropped my basket and did not look back even once.

I finally arrived at our large log home and found Papa standing close to the nearby stable. I was out of breath and had to gasp many times before I could scream, "Papa! A most horrible thing has happened. An ugly, frightening woman tells me that I will leave home and never come back." Warm, salty water oozed out of my eyes and dripped from my chin onto my clothes and then to the ground in front of me while sticky mucus ran out of my nose in thick streams.

"Where is this woman? What does she look like?" My tall, slender and kind Papa was usually so calm, but now he was yelling and his whole body was shaking.

"There are many of them. All dark. By the lake." I managed to squeal out a few more words.

"Damn gypsies. Come with me." He lifted me onto his chestnut brown mare, grabbed his long horsewhip and swung up right behind me.

After racing through the fields and the forest, we arrived at the lake. I stayed on the horse while Papa dismounted. "Which one of you lazy creatures scared my daughter by telling her lies about her future? Don't you have anything better to do? I have offered all of you work many times, but you don't accept it. You just expect me to feed you and all you give me in return is trouble." He strutted closer to the crowd and cracked his horsewhip in the air. The dark ones looked frightened. They cringed. "Which one of you? Do you dare to come closer to me and read my palm? The hell with all of you." I was relieved to see the crowd retreat at the sharp sound of the whip away from the lake and toward the edge of the forest because I could not bear the thought of seeing my beloved Papa hurt. "God help any one of you who dares to scare my daughter again. She will never leave Estonia. She is staying right here for the rest of her life."

Papa mounted the horse again and we started galloping back toward our house. We were both too upset to speak.

Just as we approached the stable, he told me, "A neighbor on an estate close to ours got rid of his gypsies by pouring bags of salt into his lake. I'm going to have to do the same thing."

"How did that get rid of them?" I felt a little calmer now.

"People cannot drink salt water or use it for cooking. These gypsies like to camp by our lake, but their campfires can easily spread to the trees and burn the forest. The situation is terribly dangerous, so I must act."

We arrived very close to the stable and Papa helped me to dismount. In a sheepish voice, I asked him: "You really don't think I will ever leave Estonia for good?"

"Never! You won't even leave our estate for good. You will always come back and visit even after you marry." His confident voice soothed me.

"Good! If you say so, Papa." I looked into his kind, grey eyes and tried to forget about the gypsies.

It was a beautiful morning but I was very, very sad because Mama told me that summer was over and that I would have to start going to school the next day. I was only six years old and felt that I was too

young to go to school. I thought I could learn everything I needed to know at the estate by playing with my friends and the animals, by playing in the fields and the forests and by helping Mama with her work.

I sobbed, grabbed a hammer and smashed the head of that silly doll with the huge head and tiny legs that Aunt Lara gave me, but no one listened. "You will like school once you get there and settle into a routine," Mama assured me.

"But I would rather stay here with you." I hugged my beautiful and strong Mama and hoped that my wish would be granted.

My wish was not granted, and the next morning I found myself walking on the soft forest trail that led to the school. Mama held my hand, but I was too sad to speak. I just stared at the shimmering leaves of the aspens and birches and then at the waving branches of the spruces and pines. They all seemed to be saying, "Stay here. Stay with us." How I wished I could have stayed with them. I didn't like September anymore.

Mama registered me and then left me at the entrance of the two-floor, brown-brick school building. "You know your way back. I'll be waiting for you at home later on today. Good luck." She hugged me.

I stared at her as she receded into the warm landscape of low, rolling hills, forests, meadows and lakes. How lucky she was.

I sat at my desk and thought of nothing else but home. Five days of school passed and the only nice thing was being in a grade one and two combination class. That meant that my best friend Evald, who was a year older than I and was in grade two, could be in the same classroom with me.

The teacher was a tall and thin man who wore little round glasses and soft shoes and walked around without making a sound. That way he could terrify you when he suddenly appeared beside you and whacked you on the knuckles with the flat side of his wooden ruler. All of us experienced this terror, and we never knew when it was going to strike. The classroom rules seemed to change every day, and one only found out about them when it was too late.

I looked over at Evald, who was sitting in the row to my left and three seats closer to the front, and dared to smile a little. He turned around immediately as if he sensed my smile, grinned at me, started squirming in his desk and waved both hands in the air right behind the back of the teacher. I tried to control my laughter, but a loud squeal escaped from my mouth.

The teacher swerved around instantly, asked Evald to stand up, and then hit him many times on the head with the ruler. Poor Evald. Poor me. I wondered if the teacher would punish me as well.

Everyone stared at Evald, who never cried or flinched even when the teacher whacked him. He had the reputation of "local devil" in the neighborhood around our home, and anything that went wrong was blamed on him. Anything at all. The two of us and our other friends had tremendous fun playing games like "mad dog tag," in which the person playing "It" ran after everyone while growling and frothing at the mouth.

When the teacher finished punishing Evald, he turned his head and glared at me. Would he walk over to me? I didn't want to be whacked. I quivered in my seat and his glare continued for a long time before he walked back to his own desk. I escaped this time, but for how long?

School did not improve for me as the weeks passed and I sat at my desk one miserable November afternoon and snuck a glance out of the window when the teacher was not looking in my direction. It would be a torture to walk all the way home in the swirling snow that was already so deep on the ground. Didn't it ever give up? Didn't it feel sorry for us?

The teacher told us that we could use the last hour of the day for art and that we could draw and paint whatever we liked, so I wasted no time at all grabbing my art supplies and arranging them on my cleared desktop. Art was my favorite subject.

I slowly copied the date from the blackboard onto the top left corner of the large piece of rough beige art paper. "November 20, 1928". Mama showed me how to write the alphabet and a few numbers before I even started school.

I thought of all the animals we had at the estate and wondered which one I should draw. The beautiful orange and cream Mama cat who was always having kittens sprang to my mind. She was so full of life that she jumped up to my hand to grab the dinner leftovers that I kept especially for her and she always took care not to hurt my hand with her needle-sharp teeth. Purring loudly after eating, she would tickle my leg with her tail. I cherished her.

I began to draw her: one large oval for her body, a smaller circle for her head, and a ringed and curved tail that rested around her paws. She was so lively that I had to give her a special face, so I looked around the room for inspiration.

I studied the large, brown mustache on the teacher's face and decided to copy that for her whiskers. I thought she would look even more interesting with glasses, so I worked hard to give her the face of the teacher and I enjoyed the aroma of wood, pencil lead and warm wax.

Just as I was putting the finishing touches on her face, I smelled powdered chalk and cologne; I looked to my right and saw the wiry legs of the teacher. Before I could look up, he grabbed the drawing and exploded: "How dare you mock me? How dare you? You will stay for one hour after school for this and the headmaster will hear about it."

My classmates left for home soon after this explosion and I saw Evald waving sympathetically at me as he walked toward the door. He couldn't help me now. Why didn't Mama let me stay home and learn everything there? Why? Why?

I sat perfectly still, stared straight ahead at the blackboard and didn't even dare to glance out of the windows, but I could see enough by moving my eyeballs to know that it was already dark outside and that the stubborn fat flakes of snow were still drifting down. To think that I had to walk all the way home in this freezing weather. Where was Mama now? Did she know what was happening to me in this wretched classroom? When was that horrible teacher going to let me go home?

I stumbled along the path that led home and found that I was too exhausted to continue without a break, so I sat down on a large tree stump and thought about the giant Kalevipoeg. If he was big enough and strong enough to make all those lakes with his huge feet and mold the gentle hills and plant all those trees with his rough hands, then maybe he could see me from his house in the sky and feel sorry for me. I was freezing and so, so tired. At least the trees looked like graceful ladies wearing wedding gowns, something beautiful to look at while falling asleep.

I heard a loud angry voice. "What the hell is going on? Why are you sitting around here so late in the day in this hellish cold? Why didn't you come straight home today? I've been searching all over for you." I felt Mama's powerful arms shaking my shoulders. She was demanding an answer, but I felt too weak to speak properly, so I just mumbled a few words about being kept late after school by the teacher and the headmaster.

Kalevipoeg answered my prayer by sending Mama to find me. She picked me up in her arms and carried me along the path through the snow. It felt like a very long time before we reached our house, but I was just so grateful that she was strong enough to do this because I felt far too weak to make another step.

She carried me to my bedroom, removed my wet clothes, dried me with warm, soft towels and helped me into my flannel nightclothes. "Thank you, Mama," I whispered as I fell asleep.

I woke up coughing violently and feeling sharp chest pains. No one was around. The only light came from the flame of a thick, white candle on the small table beside my bed and the shapes in the room looked like they were dancing on the ceiling because of the candlelight. The only sound to be heard was the occasional gunshot-like bang from the fence outside. Papa told me it did that when it was terribly cold.

Winter would be here for months and months. I groaned. At least we had double windows and the spaces between the panes were stuffed with sheep's wool. It must have been in the middle of the night and I felt so miserable, but the rounded logs that formed

the wall behind my bed felt warm and comforting. I sighed and soon fell asleep again.

I woke up to weak rays of sunlight, felt cold metal on my chest and saw the sympathetic face of our family doctor. He was sitting on my bed and Mama and Papa stood beside him. In a confident but soothing voice, he said, "I am afraid that Sonya has double pneumonia. Obviously, this is a very serious condition and she needs absolute and uninterrupted rest. I do not know when she will be able to go back to school." I was happy to hear that I would not have to go to school for a while, but I felt too ill to celebrate. I could hardly move.

Mama was furious. "God help that teacher and the headmaster. I will go to the school today and give them both such hell that they will regret this action more than anything they have ever done in their entire lives." She looked like a queen with her thick, dark hair piled up on top of her head. She was never scared of anyone, and it showed in her face. I was glad she wanted to go to the school. It would serve them right for treating me like that.

Papa stroked my hair and then led Mama and the doctor out of my room. I could hear them whispering about me as they left.

A couple of hours later, my incredibly handsome 14-year-old brother Albert came into my room. If Mama looked like a queen, he looked like a prince and everyone treated him like one. I was pleased to see him, but was also sure that he would tease me about my looks and I did not look forward to that at all.

"You're a sight, with your matted, pale blonde hair and deep hollows under your grey eyes. There was no color left for you because you were the last child. And you've lost even more weight. If you lose any more, you'll disappear." He gave me a sly smile and his blue eyes sparkled.

"Stop it," I whispered. His words did not surprise me, and I knew he was just teasing me, but I was hurt anyway. Why didn't I look as good as the others in my family? I hoped my beautiful 17-year-old sister Lara would not come here. He finally patted me on the hand and walked away.

Lara indeed came into my room soon after Albert left and I groaned and turned my head away. She also had that gorgeous thick, dark hair that Mama and Albert had and gentlemen visitors came from all over the countryside just to get a glimpse of her. Some were bold enough to ask Papa for her hand in marriage. "When you get better, I will let you try on some of my new clothes. Would you like that?" I turned to stare at her porcelain white skin, hazel eyes and noble, aquiline nose.

"Yes. Thank you, Lara." I tried all her clothes on anyway when she was out of the house and when she caught me she was always furious. She must have really felt sorry for me this time, but I was glad she soon walked out of my room. Aunt Lara and Uncle John continually showered her with lovely clothes and other presents and I was so jealous I couldn't stand it. No one treated me like that.

Many days passed and I just felt worse. I could hear Mama and Papa talking in the next room but their voices were very low so I laid perfectly still in my bed and tried my best to hear what they were saying.

"I will have to order a white coffin for her." I recognized Papa's voice and gasped sharply.

"She may get better, but it looks doubtful. I agree. You better order one. You are going into town today anyway, aren't you?" Mama sounded anxious and hot tears burned my cheeks.

"We have her height and weight, don't we?"

"Yes. The measurements were taken at school recently." Oh my God. Could this be happening?

I fell asleep and drifted into a world of nightmares: I fell down into the deep dark well close to our house. No! Please, no! Then I ran through our fields and a gigantic bull raced so close behind me that I could feel his hot breath and knife-sharp horns on my back.

"She's alive! I saw faint breaths. We don't need the coffin yet." The bull disappeared and I saw Albert's face. He looked very happy and I asked him for the wooden rocking cradle I liked so much when I was two years old.

As he pulled the cradle out of the closet, Mama, Papa and Lara appeared and rushed to hold my hands and stroke my hair.

Mama lifted me into the cradle and I smiled for the first time in days. I held on to the rim, started rocking, and used all the meager strength I had to make the cradle rock back and forth as far as it could go without tipping over.

I soon coughed so violently that I began to choke. Mama yanked me out of the cradle, grabbed me by the ankles, turned me upside down and watched thick streams of stinky, greenish-yellow liquid ooze out of my nose and my mouth. I was held upside down for a very long time.

When Mama finally turned me right side up, Albert exclaimed, "You saved her life. Quick thinking, Mother."

"Thank you. It reminds me of the time when I turned her upside down after she swallowed your uncle's fox poison cubes."

"Yes. She thought they were candies." Albert chuckled.

I hugged Mama as she put me back to bed; I didn't want to let go, but I had to because I had no strength left. She cleaned my face and neck vigorously with a wet cloth and then kissed me on the forehead. She saved my life twice already and that meant more than all the presents in the world. I wished she could have stayed close to me forever.

I knew that I barely escaped death, so Christmas meant more to me than ever that year. One frozen late afternoon I laid under the big spruce tree in the living room and looked up at the burning beeswax candles and all the delicious cookies and candies that were fastened to the branches. I picked one cookie, ate it slowly, and closed my eyes as I tasted the currants and the icing sugar and breathed in the fantastic aroma of warm evergreen needles and candle smoke. Winter heaven.

There must have been at least 15 relatives visiting us from Tallinn. Mama, Lara, Aunt Lara and some other ladies were making blood sausage, head cheese and rye bread in the kitchen and the aroma was wonderful. Uncle John and some other gentlemen wound up the gramophone in the adjoining dining room and talked about putting on a polka record and trying to dance to it.

Papa came into the living room, poked at the burning logs in the fireplace, the flying sparks were so pretty, and sat down in his favorite chair beside the tree. The logs made loud snapping sounds. This was a wonderful fireplace, it heated up the whole house because tubes inside the walls carried the heat all around the rooms instead of letting it escape through the chimney.

I got up from under the tree to sit on an armrest next to him, but I didn't say anything because my mouth was full. He lit up his pipe, put his arm around me and began singing "Volga, Volga" with a deep and soothing voice.

When he finished, I asked him, "Are you singing in Russian, Papa?"

"Yes!" He smoked his pipe and smiled.

"Why do you like to sing in Russian?"

"Because I worked as a military officer for the last czar of Russia." He looked serious.

"What is a czar?"

"A czar is like a king, only 10 times more powerful." My eyes widened. "Our little country of Estonia was under the Russian czar until very recently. You were born very soon after we finally won our first independence. That makes you very special." He took me in his lap and I put my arms around him.

"What is independence?"

"It means freedom. We can govern ourselves now without having to take orders from strangers." His face brightened with pleasure.

"Was the czar nice to you, Papa?"

"I did not actually meet the czar face-to-face, but one of his representatives rewarded me with this huge estate we live on now. Do you know that it was twice as big as it is now and I gave half of it to your Uncle Thomas?" His voice was soft and low.

"No. You are so kind, Papa." I gently touched his reddish brown mustache and remembered how funny it looked with the tiny white icicles hanging from it when he worked outside.

"I loved the city of St. Petersburg. I worked there for a few years and even met your mother there. Many magnificent palaces line the river and the streetlights are so strong at night that one can read a newspaper under them." He started singing another Russian song and occasionally paused to smoke his pipe. "My younger brother, your Uncle Ivar, met the czar face-to-face."

"Really?" I sat up straight and listened attentively.

"Uncle Ivar was one of the czar's personal bodyguards. We have a huge portrait of him here. Have you ever seen it?"

"Yes! But I did not know who it was." I often stared at that portrait because this man was so incredibly handsome and his clothes were stunning. "Where is he now?" I desperately wanted to meet him.

"He is buried in St. Petersburg." Papa slumped forward a little and looked down on the floor. "He drank too much vodka at a wild officers' party and fell out of a window and into the Neva River." He sighed heavily.

"No! I want to go and visit his grave." I jumped up and down on his lap.

"Maybe you will. Maybe you will." He patted me on the shoulder, but I realized that it was time to leave him alone.

I left the big room and walked toward the sauna room. I heard a lot of laughter from behind the closed birchwood door. I opened it a little and saw three aunts beating themselves with birch branches and taking deep breaths in the steamy air. They were bright red all over, and it felt so hot that I quickly backed away.

"Want to join us?" They beckoned me and giggled.

"No, thanks." I backed away even more before they could grab me and coax me into the sauna. I knew they would beat themselves fiercely with the birch branches, then run naked out into the snow and roll around in it and then they would run back into the sauna. I didn't think I would ever like that.

I continued walking toward the big storage room and saw the long work table where Papa made his own beer. I found some, tasted it, spat it out and swore I would never taste it again.

As I ran my fingers along the fur-covered sleigh I dreamt about an evening ride through the snow and under the stars.

A long hall led into the stable and the horses heard me coming. They neighed softly and stepped back and forth while swishing their tails because they knew I would give them the sugar cubes they loved so much.

After picking up lots of cubes from a shelf, I walked over to the closest horse, held out my palm and felt the mare's lips tickling my skin as she gobbled up the cubes. I stroked her neck. Animals. They loved you back no matter what you looked like, as long as you were kind to them. They were my best friends.

I dreaded going back to school after Christmas, but when I got there I realized that Mama's scornful visit with the teacher and the headmaster made such a strong impression that I was left in peace for the rest of the year. I still didn't like this school, but I just kept dreaming about summer and the estate.

On the last day of the school year in early June I practically flew home because I did not want to waste one precious moment.

Mama sent me to the hand-cranked well to get more water for the kitchen and as I approached the well I heard faint meowing sounds. I ran right up to the waist-high stone rim of the well, looked down, and saw two kittens grasping on to the uneven edges of the stones that lined the interior. They were about two meters down from the rim, they looked up at me with pitiful, pleading eyes, and their meowing got louder and more desperate. "Albert! Albert! Two kittens are in the well." I screamed and hoped that he would hear me. He would have to.

I looked around anxiously and soon saw him running toward me with a chair and a long rope. "Don't worry, I'll get them out." He smiled and sounded very confident.

He tied the rope to the chair and started lowering it until the flat seat was at the level of the kittens. "Come on, come on, step on the platform, you will be fine. Don't be scared." He called out to them with a calm and soothing voice.

Little paws tested the platform to see if it was safe and one kitten stepped onto it. "Come on, you can do it." He continued in the same

encouraging voice and the other kitten also found the courage to step onto the chair.

"They did it, they did it." I jumped up and down and patted my brother on the back.

"Careful. I still have to bring them up." He slowly pulled the chair up so as not to scare the kittens too much and soon the desperate little creatures appeared over the top of the rim. One was black with a white apron on her breast and the other was light grey with a few darker stripes here and there. I picked them up and held them in my arms close to my heart. I could feel their trembling bodies. I stroked them and kissed them and listened as their loud meowing became weaker and softer.

"You really are amazing. You always know what to do in any emergency," I said to him. I kept stroking the kittens. "Do you have time to play with me for a while?"

"Not now, but maybe later." He untied the rope from the chair as we walked back toward the house and I put the kittens down beside their milk dish.

I looked toward the road beside the wheat field and noticed a man galloping at top speed toward us. Albert turned around sharply and said, "That's one of our neighbors. I wonder what he wants."

The man headed straight for us and reached us in no time. He was breathless and the horse was sweating. "One of my larger farm machines is not working. Albert, can you come and look at it? I really need your help." The man looked desperate.

"All right, I'll see what I can do," Albert said.

"Good! I'll take you there right now." Albert mounted behind the man and they galloped away so fast they vanished in a few seconds.

Albert was only 15 and already had the reputation of being a mechanical genius all around our area because he could fix complex machines even if he had never seen them before. He was always in great demand. On top of that he was more handsome than ever and he had learned to play the violin very well. How I wished I would have had even a small part of his good looks and talents. I didn't

seem to be really good at anything, I looked like a clown, and I felt like a weakling because I nearly died before Christmas.

Albert was too important to waste his time playing with me, so I stared at the ground and gave a good strong kick to a couple of pebbles.

When I stepped back into the house, I was greeted by a warm aroma of spiced fruit. Lara stood next to the wood-burning stove and stirred one of the big metal pots and the large, sturdy worktable was covered with steaming glass jars. "What are you doing?"

"Making berry jam. Be careful around those jars and don't touch them. Did you bring water?" Her voice was stern and she frowned at me.

"No. I forgot because of the kittens." I looked down at the floor and she sighed heavily. I slowly looked up at her. She wore a large apron, looked very serious as she worked, did not smile and kept tending the pots. She already knew almost as much as Mama did about cooking because she was enrolled in a special high school that taught her all about home economics and she was supposed to be the best student there.

It took me some time to build up the courage to ask, "Do you have any time to play with me today?"

"I don't have time to play, but I can show you how to make a proper buttonhole. One of your blouses needs a new one and I'm sure Mama won't mind watching the stove for a while." Mama started stirring the pots.

Lara led me to her room and asked me to fetch the white blouse with the red embroidered flowers. I found it and brought it back to her.

There was a sewing machine with a foot pedal set up in the middle of the room and all sorts of colored threads and different sizes of needles were arranged neatly on a small table close to the machine.

She showed me a little square patch of white material and made a small hole in it with her scissors. "We will practice on this first." She threaded a needle and began to sew around the edges of the hole with such great precision and patience that all the stitches looked perfect.

When she finished, she gave me the square patch and told me to imitate her work. I took the scissors and made a larger hole. "That is too big." She was annoyed and frowned at me.

I tried again, made a smaller hole, and looked at her for approval. "That is still too big, but it will have to do for now. Start sewing around the edges," she commanded.

I started sewing, but my stitches were completely crooked, they went this way and that way. She snatched the patch from me. "Aach! You are hopeless. You can't even make a proper buttonhole. I have no more time to waste with you. I'm going back to the kitchen." She got up and dragged me out of her room. "I will fix your blouse later. Do not touch it." She waved her finger at me as a warning.

I ran to the kitchen, picked up a long, sharp bread knife, dashed out into the middle of the garden, cut the little finger of my left hand with the knife and watched a steady stream of blood spurt out of it and onto the ground. I screamed, "Nobody loves me, nobody loves me." Then I lay down and beat the ground with my fists. I could taste the earth on my wet lips.

Mama ran out to me, lifted me up, hugged me and said, "But I do."

"I know. You do," I whispered. She rushed me back to the house, cleaned my wound, put a bandage around it, stroked my hair and said, "Why don't you stop crying now and go and pick wild strawberries?"

"Yes, Mama, I will do that. Thank you for bandaging my finger." I went out into the garden again and the powerful scent coming from the long, thick lilac hedge cheered me a little and helped me to forget about the buttonhole disaster. The spruces that met the lilac hedge swayed gently in the breeze. It was a magnificent garden and no one could look in from the outside because the lilac hedge and the evergreens were too high and too thick. Albert even built a little platform and music stand where the lilacs met the evergreens so he could practice in peace. He also created a flagstone path leading back to the house from the platform.

I followed the flagstones back to the house, picked up my basket and then rushed out through the fields and to the forest.

Wandering through the forest calmed me down and I enjoyed picking the aromatic and incredibly sweet berries. No gypsies came here this summer because the lake was too salty. Papa's neighbor was right.

At the end of the summer Mama and Papa decided to send me to a boarding school not too far from the estate because they thought it would be much better for me than a regular school.

One windy, sunny morning, just before the end of the summer vacation, Albert placed me on the handlebars of his sturdy bicycle and rode to the school.

We stopped in front of a dark brown brick castle that was close to a creek and surrounded by a park full of birches and pines. "This was built by a German baron over 100 years ago. How do you like it?" He smiled affectionately at me as I stared at the circular turret and thought of pictures in fairy tale books.

"I like it." I smiled.

"Good! It won't be so bad. You will come home frequently for holidays." He sounded very reassuring.

"I hope so." I hoped I wouldn't have any mean teachers here.

Chapter Two

I liked the school in the castle much more than the first one. My favorite teacher lived in the turret and sometimes let me pretend that I was saving her from a dragon that tried to pull her out of the tower through a small window.

There was a dark stone dungeon deep down in the earth below the main floor of the castle and my friends and I spent hours saving each other from "horrible fates." We screamed and ran up the stairs when the atmosphere became so realistic that we really terrorized ourselves.

By the time I was in the fourth grade, my classmates elected me to be their student supervisor and my duties included keeping order in the cafeteria at mealtimes and inspecting the dormitories in the evening to make sure everyone had settled down. My confidence grew because everyone told me I was a good supervisor.

At lunch time we often ate herring and some boys thought that they could get away with throwing the little fish up to the ceiling so that they would stick on it. They thought that this was very funny, but I made them stand up on the long tables and use long brooms to clean the ceiling. They also had to clean the tables, so they tried this trick less and less as the year progressed. "Don't try to outwit Sonya," they all said.

As much as I liked the new school, nothing compared with the estate. When the fourth grade finished in the first week of June, I rushed home so that my wonderful summer life could begin again.

Papa brimmed with pride when I saw him standing by the stable in the brilliant sunlight. "Come and take a look at my new horse," he said and smiled triumphantly. "This young stallion is already so outstanding that an officer in the cavalry tells me that I will be able to sell him to his unit for a very high price when he matures. I'm not sure if I will ever want to sell him, but it is good to know how valuable he really is." He took me by the arm and led me into the stable.

The scent of fresh hay and manure greeted me, it was actually a pleasant earthy combination and was not overpowering. We approached the stallion. He looked as perfect as a statue, he was silver-grey with darker grey spots and his arched neck showed the confidence of royalty. He stepped back and forth with energy and impatience, turned his head to look at us, lifted it as if he recognized us, and gave us an affectionate look.

Papa stroked his neck and whispered in his ear. The stallion neighed softly. I did not like riding horses, but I enjoyed their company very much and admired their beauty. This was a truly stunning horse. "I hope you never sell him to the cavalry," I said.

"If you don't want me to, I won't." Papa's eyes moistened as he put his arm around me.

In the evening I went to Mama's room. "Can I sleep on the cot beside your bed tonight? I've missed you so much."

"Of course. That's what the cot is for." She smiled sweetly at me. "You can brush my hair if you like." She arched her eyebrows and waited for my reply.

"Oh, yes! Please!" I always loved an opportunity to do this. Mama sat in front of her mirror and I took the pins out of her bun. Her hair cascaded down to her waist and I brushed it slowly and evenly.

She started singing a German song:

"Ich weiss nicht was soll es bedeuten
Dass ich so traurig bin"

Her voice was strong and enchanting. "What does it mean?"

"I don't know what it means that I feel so sad." She continued to sing and I felt the vibrations bouncing off the walls and going through my body. She was the lead soprano in the church choir and when she sang in the forest she could be heard from at least two kilometers away.

When she finished the song, I asked her, "How come you can sing in German so well?" I admired her beautiful reflection in the mirror and wondered if I would ever look like that.

"My father was a coachmaker for a German baron who relocated to southern Estonia from Königsberg. He eventually married a local woman and had three children: me, your aunt Lara and your uncle Albert. We grew up in southern Estonia close to Lake Peipus and then we moved up to the northwest to be closer to Tallinn."

"Lake Peipus. I learned about it in school and it is supposed to freeze around the edges in winter."

"Yes. And Russian bears and wolves used to walk across to our area and terrorize the neighborhood."

"Did they kill people?" I gasped sharply.

"Occasionally." My eyes widened. "One particular male bear was so aggressive that Father and his companions had to think of a way to stop him. They filled a wooden trough with honey, wheat and many liters of vodka. They placed the trough at the base of a big tree and then climbed up there to wait."

"Eventually the bear ambled by and was immediately attracted to the honey. He ate everything in the trough, walked around in circles for a while and then fell down. When the men were sure he was asleep they came down from the tree and shot him. The bearskin ended up in front of our fireplace."

I thought about Mama's exciting youth as I laid down on the cot and tried to sleep.

Some soft bumps against the window woke me up in the middle of the night. Mama also woke up and we walked over to the window to investigate. We could clearly see our German shepherd in the weak moonlight. "It's Rexxy! Why isn't he barking? He must be trying to warn us about something." Mama's face darkened. "Oh,

no! Thieves are here and want to steal our new prize horse." She sounded unusually apprehensive.

"How do you know that? Do you see thieves?"

"No. I just know. I can feel it." I looked at her moonlit face in disbelief. How could she just know something like this? "Go and wake up Papa while I get dressed. Go. Now."

I ran over to Papa's room and woke him and as soon as he heard the first few words about Rexxy, he jumped out of bed and grabbed his rifle. He ran outside in his housecoat while I stood at the door and stared. I was sorry Albert was not at home.

Soon I heard rifle shots, terrified animal cries and men shouting. Mama grabbed the kerosene lamp and ran past me toward Papa. Lara also appeared with a kerosene lamp and stood beside me. "Let's go out and see what is happening," she said as the glow of the light illuminated her deeply worried face.

The noise came mainly from the stable, so we headed over to it. Papa was shouting, "Go, Rexxy! After them!" Distant growling and screaming pierced the night air.

Papa approached us and he was out of breath. "The bastards were just leading the stallion out of the stable when I sent Rexxy after them and fired at them. Thanks to the dog, the stallion is unhurt and is back in the stable." His voice was hoarse and he sighed heavily.

Mama ran over to us. "They have stolen Father's uniform and they have also tried to steal meat from the outdoor cellar. Come and see what they did to the meat because Rexxy stopped them from stealing it." She shouted and her jaw jutted out stubbornly.

We rushed over to the cellar and saw huge sides of beef and pork lying on the ground and when we looked closely, we saw muddy footprints all over the meat. Mama shook with fury. "What a sinful thing to do. They couldn't steal it, so they made sure that no one else could eat it. I curse the people who did this. May their legs swell so much that they will never be able to walk again."

The meat looked pitiful. Those poor animals gave up their lives for us and now they were desecrated with dirt. I wondered if Mama's curse would work and I hoped it would.

Summer passed too quickly.

I enjoyed grade five at the castle, and my fellow students re-elected me as their supervisor. The job was easier now because I was taller and stronger. The wonderful summers at the estate made the difference.

One Sunday in October, when I was visiting the estate, Mama received a written message from a stranger who arrived on horseback in the morning.

She read the note and exclaimed, "Aha! I knew it. I knew this would happen eventually." The crisp cool air made her cheeks glow and she smiled wryly.

"What, what?" I could hardly wait for an answer.

"This note is sent by one of the thieves who tried to steal Father's stallion. Apparently, he is dying and he wants me to visit him in Tallinn so that he can confess in person. He wants me to forgive him."

She put the note down on the kitchen table, walked over to a cupboard, poured herself a glass of straight vodka and drank it all at once.

"Can I come with you if you go? Please? Please?"

"Judging by the address on the note, he does not live in a good part of town." She spoke softly and shook her head.

"I want to come anyway. I really do. Please?" I walked over to her and held her hand.

"All right, but I may not let you come into the man's bedroom. I will see how things develop." She studied the note.

That same day, Father took us in his carriage to the town of Kadri, which was about 20 kilometers north of the estate. From there, we continued north with a train for about 80 kilometers and passed through an idyllic countryside composed of gentle hills, young birch forests and small sparkling lakes.

After about an hour, we arrived at a station in a depressed part of Tallinn. We walked on a street lined with old wooden houses that were falling apart. The once bright paint was completely faded, many windows were boarded up and stairs leading up to front doors were

uneven and lopsided. Some oafish men staggered around while holding liquor bottles tightly in swollen hands, so I held Mama's hand and moved closer to her strong muscular body.

We stopped in front of a small wooden house that might have once been dark green and Mama studied the faded number by the door. "This must be it," she said. I stayed close to her as she knocked on the door.

We stood for several minutes and waited for a response. There was no sign of life, so Mama knocked again and used so much force that the door shook and rattled. I marveled at her courage. A little curtain beside the door moved slightly and then the door opened a tiny bit.

A balding man with the eyes of a boar and a pot belly peeked at Mama and then opened the door wider. "You must be Lydia. Karl's wife," he said hoarsely.

"Yes, I am Lydia. I am here because I received this note." She boldly showed it to him.

"Please come in and follow me," he said. As soon as we entered we were struck by the stench of rotten food, stale beer and vomit. What a contrast this was to the freshly cut wood and wild berry aroma in our forest; I coughed and tried to suppress the reflex. There were only a few pieces of dilapidated furniture on the uneven floor.

"You stay right here at the door," Mama told me as we approached the entrance to the man's bedroom. The floorboards sank, creaked and groaned and I gasped as I stared at the body in the narrow bed in the corner. The blankets were pulled off and were crumpled at the foot of the bed; the man's legs were frightfully swollen, perhaps to four or five times the size of Papa's legs. It was a horrifying sight. Thief or not, I felt sorry for him. Then I remembered Mama's curse and I gasped again.

She sat down on the bed beside him and he reached out to her with his hands and whispered, "I am one of those who walked over your meat and tried to steal your horse. I know I am dying, but I cannot die in peace until you forgive me for what I have done."

Mama spoke in a velvety soothing voice. "I forgive you. I see that fate has already punished you more than I could ever have done."

"Thank you," he whispered.

She got up slowly, walked over to me and took my hand. We started walking toward the front door, and on the way I noticed some newspapers on a small hall table: they had bold Russian headlines and were decorated with printed red stars. Mama noticed them also and stopped to look for a few seconds.

After we left the house, she said, "Those people are local Estonian communists and they are reading Russian communist literature."

"What is a communist?"

"Someone who believes that no one should be wealthier than anyone else. That explains why these men came to our estate and tried to steal our property. What really sickens me is the hatred they displayed by walking over the meat. But see what happened to this man? Sonya, it never pays to do evil deeds. I have noticed that people rarely get away with it. And God help evil people who are cursed by innocent people."

The more I got to know Mama, the more she amazed me. But I was frightened by these people called communists. What if there were many more of them lurking and waiting for a good opportunity to seize our possessions? Mama may not have been able to stop them. What would happen if the whole country were taken over by these thugs? What if they would become murderers as well as thieves? I shuddered.

"We still have lots of time. Let's visit the old town and cheer up a little." Mama squeezed my hand as if she knew how frightened I was.

We got on a bus and rode for about 10 blocks before we got off and started walking. "We are very close now. I want you to see the view from the top of Parliament Hill before anything else," she said and smiled.

We walked up a very steep and narrow cobblestone street. "This is Pikk Jalg, or Long Leg Street. It will lead us up to the parliament

buildings. Hundreds of years ago this was the only way to get up to the Toompea Castle where the rulers were."

"Why was this the only way?" I kept my head down as I struggled to get a secure footing on the uneven and bumpy stones, one wrong move and I would have twisted my ankle.

"Because so many different invaders and conquerors wanted to rule our country and their victory would never be complete until they would have control of the Toompea Castle. Pikk Jalg made it harder to get up there." She held out her hand to me when she saw me wobbling on the stones.

We finally reached the Toompea walled fortress at the top of the hill and I was impressed by a striking, tall stone tower that had our blue, black and white flag fluttering from a flagpole at the top.

"This is the Pikk Hermann tower. It is the symbol of political power in our country and there have always been foreign flags flying from it. How wonderful it is to see our own flag at last. It has taken centuries for this to happen." She had tears in her eyes.

"I'm glad I don't have to see a conqueror's flag. I swear that if I see one, I will tear it down." I frowned and stamped my foot on the flagstones and Mama laughed.

"They would arrest you and maybe even kill you for that."

"I don't care," I said and stamped my foot again. Mama tickled my hand and laughed softly.

We walked over to a fortress wall and looked over the city out to the Baltic Sea. I was speechless. I saw tall stone towers with reddish brown conical roofs, tall and pointed church spires, onion-domed churches, peach-pink palaces, yellow buildings with green doors, brick castles with black turrets, many thick trees below the fortress and a harbor full of ships and small boats.

"Mama, this is fantastic." I held on to the wall and just gazed in awe.

"Yes. It has taken centuries to build all this beauty. The Danes, Swedes, Germans and Russians have all left their mark on our local culture." She gazed at the peach palace right behind us.

"Can we explore more of the old town?"

"Of course. Let's take the short way down the hill." She was very enthusiastic and grasped my hand as we began the descent down Short Leg Street; it was even steeper than the Long Leg Street and I had to watch not to roll over and tumble all the way down. I squeezed her hand tightly.

We reached the Town Hall Square, which was a very large open space surrounded by beautiful pastel-colored buildings. I felt that I was on a stage and that a dramatic play was about to begin all around me.

Mama pointed out the town hall. "It was started in the early 1300's and was completed hundreds of years later. That is why it has Gothic arches and Baroque curves." I was fascinated by the dragonhead waterspouts placed around the roof.

"Many exciting things have happened in this square over the centuries, including wedding processions, executions, carnivals, and Christmas-tree-raising parties. Even Peter the Great of Russia attended one of those parties." She stopped to buy a little cake from a street vendor, cut it in half and gave me some.

"Can we visit Lara now?" I suddenly remembered that she worked at a fancy coffee house in the old town.

"I was just thinking the same thing. Let's go." She finished her cake and a few crumbs dropped down on the cobblestones.

After walking along some more narrow streets, we reached a sturdy stone building with multi-colored stained glass windows and a dark brown, carved wooden door that was so heavy Mama had to open it for me.

It was quite sunny outside, so when we stepped inside it took a few seconds to adjust to the darkness. I stared in awe. All the walls were covered with huge tapestries and thick burgundy velvet drapes, and the tapestries featured brightly colored medieval knights, ladies, horses and castles on pale beige backgrounds.

An enormous golden chandelier was hanging from the ceiling in the center of the room, right above a shiny, black grand piano. All the tables were covered with white tablecloths and had silver vases containing red roses. "Lara is the manager here and her office is in

the back," Mama whispered to me as she led me through the restaurant and toward the office.

The door was open and we saw Lara sitting behind a large desk and frowning at stacks of papers. When she saw us, she got up and smiled. "What a lovely surprise," she said.

Mama told her that we would not stay long and asked her how she enjoyed living with Aunt Lara and Uncle John.

"They are so good to me and it only takes me five minutes to walk to work," she said and smiled. I admired her smart beige suit and sparkling jewelry and wondered if I would ever be good enough at anything to work in a fantastic place like this.

As we left, Lara said, "Come back soon. Sonya, maybe you could help me with my paperwork one of these days." I was radiant with pleasure. I would have loved to come back here.

I enjoyed the fifth grade and the summer that followed it, and when I went back to the castle for the sixth grade I was re-elected as the class supervisor. The teachers congratulated me and I was happy about that.

I was ecstatic when summer returned and I saw that my final report card was quite good. I knew Mama and Papa would be pleased and I couldn't wait to get home.

When I arrived back at the estate, I found Albert and our cousin Alex playing violin duets on the music platform in our garden. They both smiled at me and kept playing. Alex often walked over from Uncle Thomas's house because it only took him a few minutes.

I wanted to stay out in the garden and dance to the music, but I remembered that I had to go inside and show my report card to Mama and Papa. I rushed inside, left the card on the dining room table and rushed back to the garden.

Albert and Alex stopped playing. "Welcome back, and congratulations for finishing elementary school," they both said.

"Thanks! What were you just playing?" I performed a couple of pirouettes and laughed.

"A duet by Brahms," Alex said. "He had a very serious face and a long beard." He contorted his face into a mock frown and stroked

an imaginary beard. He could imitate anyone, was always in a good mood, was very tall and thin and had the face of a professional comedian. I always enjoyed his company.

"Please play something I can dance to. You know how much I love to dance," I said as I performed some more ballet steps.

"Fine. We'll play some Hungarian gypsy melodies. Our favorites," Albert said. He turned the pages of the music book.

Suddenly I remembered the gypsy who told me I would leave home forever, but I brushed the sickening image out of my mind when the fiery music started and began expressing myself with vivacious movements. I kicked my right leg up as high as I could, I twirled around many times quickly, I bent over and touched the ground and leapt as high as I could. Albert was nice enough to give me the money for secret ballet lessons, but Papa would have been furious if he had found out. Summer was here, and I inhaled the intoxicating aroma of the lilac hedge.

"Sonya! Come here. Now." I heard Papa calling me from the back steps. He didn't sound too pleased, but my report card was quite good. What was wrong?

I rushed back into the dining room. Papa looked somber and slowly twirled his mustache. "Listen here. One crazy artist in this house is already one too many. Instead of behaving like a real man, Albert just plays instruments. When he plays that accursed trumpet I send him to the outdoor cellar. Alex is also crazy, but that is my brother's responsibility. I wish Thomas could control him. He is a bad influence around here."

I wanted to say, "But Papa, Albert is studying to become an electrical engineer and is already making a good living fixing machines and Alex is studying law at Tartu University. They are both very smart and are not just crazy artists," but I did not dare. Papa would have been furious and I would have never heard the end of it.

Papa continued in the same somber tone. "I will need a pharmacist in the family to help me take care of my 20 field workers. To become a pharmacist, you will have to attend an expensive classical academic high school and then you will have to become

an apprentice for one year in a pharmacy. If you show aptitude, you will continue your studies at Tartu University." He picked up my report card and scrutinized it. "However, there is a stiff entrance exam that you must pass in order to enter this private high school and I am not sure if you can make it." He looked somewhat anxious.

I stared at the floor. It seemed that my marks were not quite up to his standards. On the other hand, he was willing to pay for the expensive high school, so he was offering me a tremendous favor. Albert and Lara had to pay for their own specialized high school training.

"Yes, Papa," I said softly. What else could I say? I was flooded with feelings of apprehension and inadequacy. What if I did not pass the entrance test? What if I entered the school but did not perform well academically? What if I did not like pharmacy?

One sunny and warm day in early July, Albert placed me on the handlebars of his sturdy bicycle and took me to the high school in the town of Kadri so that I could take the entrance exam. He rarely teased me about my looks anymore even though I still didn't look nearly as good as the others in my family. He was a wonderful brother and I was becoming more and more attached to him.

After we arrived at the imposing three-floor sandstone school he told me, "The best of luck to you. I'll be waiting for you outside, no matter how long it takes."

"Thank you very much." I stared at the ground because I dreaded having to take this exam.

"You will be fine," he said as he shook my hand and smiled.

The exam lasted for two hours and had questions in every subject imaginable, but the main emphasis was on language and arithmetic and there was a written section and an oral section. Three teachers grilled me during the oral section and I had to excuse myself twice to go to the bathroom because I was so nervous. There were about 20 other students in the bleak classroom.

When the exam was over, I was told to wait outside the room for the results. I was not even allowed to go out of the building, so I

couldn't talk to Albert. I just sat on a hard wooden bench, breathed deeply and wondered what was going to happen next.

After what seemed like an eternity, a stern-faced teacher opened the classroom door slightly and beckoned me. Oh, no. I got up and walked slowly over to the teacher. "You passed. Congratulations. You may start high school here in September."

I couldn't believe it. I walked out to see if my brother was still there. He was. "I passed," I squealed with delight.

"Terrific. I had a feeling you might. Mama and Papa will be so surprised, er, I mean pleased." He flashed a teasing smile.

I slapped him gently on the arm and laughed. I didn't mind his teasing anymore.

It was wonderful to feel the breeze playing with my hair as we cycled home. Twenty kilometers were nothing for Albert and he whistled folk tunes all the way back.

When we arrived back at the house, Papa looked at us with apprehension from the steps of the front door. "She passed," Albert called out to him.

"Well, well." Papa smiled broadly. "Congratulations. Now you better work really hard to get excellent marks. Passing alone will not be good enough. I won't pay for you if you get mediocre marks."

"Yes, Papa. I will try my best." I walked up to him and he put his arm around me. He smelled like leather and clover.

Mama rushed over to me and hugged me. "You must make the most of this opportunity. I wanted to be an opera singer, but my parents did not have the money or the interest to push my career. My voice teacher was very sad when I told her I would not continue with my studies."

"I believe you, Mama. Your voice is so powerful." Actually, everything about Mama was powerful. What a pity she was not a professional opera singer.

"I will ask Lara to make two uniforms for you so that one will always be clean. We will go to Kadri together and look for a room and a nice landlady. You will have to become even more independent now. It will be difficult at first, but you will come home on

weekends and holidays." She smiled radiantly at me and I knew I would have to come home frequently to receive an infusion of courage from her. If the teachers were going to be anything like the tight-lipped, stern-faced vultures who presided over the entrance exam, I would need to come home as often as possible.

I spent the rest of the summer playing with good friends like Evald and others from around the neighborhood. Evald was still the "local devil" and he was even worse now because he was older, stronger and craftier.

I wished the summer would never end and I tried not to think about the new school too much, but it loomed in my near future like a pregnant thundercloud.

Chapter Three

In the last week of August, Mama took me to Kadri so that we could find a proper place to live. We found a nice house a few blocks away from the school and my landlady seemed to be a very kind woman who promised to look after me as if I were her own daughter. Mama trusted her and promised to keep in close contact with her.

Kadri was a picturesque town of about 5,000 people and a famous 11th century ruin that was mainly rubble with only a few intact walls and battlements stood at the top of a hill at the edge of town. There were vodka distilleries and factories in the outskirts.

There were a few imposing mansions along the narrow, winding river that flowed through the town and I wondered who lived in those lovely homes. Perhaps some of the factory owners?

But most of the houses were small and ordinary and there were several gloomy apartment buildings for those people who could not afford even a small wooden house.

Once classes began in the middle of September, my worst fear materialized: this girls-only school was run by German academics and the atmosphere was so oppressive that I might as well have been in prison. There were stiff punishments for just about anything one did: if you spoke out of turn you had to stay after school and write lines for an hour; if you wore any kind of make-up you had to wash it off and go to the headmaster's office and anyone who went in there came out crying; if you missed a day of school without a valid doctor's excuse, you had to stay after school let

out at noon on Saturday and you had to scrub toilets for two or three hours.

Classes started at nine in the morning and continued until four in the afternoon from Monday to Friday. As if the classes were not long enough, we had three to four hours of homework every night and every teacher thought that his or her own subject was the most important one. Naturally, if your homework was not done, you were severely punished. If you did not pass every single subject at the end of the year, you had to repeat the year or go to another school. There were rigorous exams before Christmas and at the end of the year.

I moved from one teacher's room to another all day. I had science, math, history, geography, Estonian language and literature, German language and literature, English language and literature, Russian language and literature and gymnastics classes. Hardly any of the teachers ever smiled except when they were being sarcastic.

The only teacher who was genuinely cheerful was our Russian teacher, and she was a Slav who came from Russia and settled in Estonia. I loved going to her class.

I passed the seventh grade successfully in spite of everything.

On October 3, 1935 I turned 14 and it was a crisp and cool inspiring day. I sat in the history teacher's class and snuck a glance out of the window to admire the golden brown oak leaves that were waving at the azure sky. How I longed to leap out of the window and catch the train back to the estate! Being in class was no way to celebrate a birthday.

The teacher lectured from her desk and she wore a long dark grey dress that had little buttons going all the way from her neck down to her ankles. "The Danes and the Germans fought over the city of Tallinn for many years, but by the year 1285 the city was a member of the Hanseatic League of northern European trading cities. Many of the medieval Hanseatic buildings survive in the old town today. How many of you have seen the old town?"

I raised my hand energetically. Now this was interesting. I would have given anything to be walking in the Town Square and buying a hazelnut chocolate bar from a street vendor.

The teacher continued: "No matter who the conquerors were, the local Finno-Ugric Estonians were mostly used as serfs. Peter the Great of Russia incorporated us into his empire by the year 1721 but the German nobles who were firmly entrenched all over the country used local serfs to work on their huge tracts of land. Our history has been very complex, but we hope that it will be less violent from now on."

"With the encouragement of the great American president Woodrow Wilson, our own president Konstantin Päts declared Estonia's first true independence in 1918. We are living in a wave of new patriotism, and many people with foreign surnames are changing them to local Estonian names. How many of you are aware of this movement?" She looked around the room carefully.

I did not raise my hand because Papa's surname was Swedish, and he never spoke of changing his name. Should we have changed our family name? Would we have gotten into serious trouble if we didn't? But we were Estonian now and we all loved this country. I wanted to grow up fast so that I could help it to freely express a culture that had been pushed underground for centuries.

I prayed that we would escape the Siberian style winter we always had, but my prayers were not answered. We had to trudge through deep snow to get to school even when it was 20 degrees Celsius below outside and it had to be minus 21 or colder for us to be allowed to stay home.

I woke up one January morning and saw my breath crystallizing above me as I looked up from the bed. It looked like a spiral galaxy. Surely it was cold enough outside to be allowed to stay home?

I got dressed, rushed down the stairs to the back door, pulled on my heavy overcoat and opened the door just enough to see the thermometer that was attached to the doorpost. I swore it looked like minus 21, so I decided not to go to school through thigh-deep snow.

As soon as I arrived at school the next day, the headmaster glared at me in the entrance hall and hissed, "Come into my office right now." His pale blue eyes were icy behind his horn-rimmed glasses

and his lips had practically disappeared. I tried to control my trembling body, but I couldn't and was terribly embarrassed because the trembling was so visible.

The headmaster sat down on his leather chair and I stood in front of the desk. Everything smelled so official, so authoritative. "You know that classes are held even if it is minus 20. What excuse do you have for not coming yesterday?" He still hissed.

"My landlady's thermometer looked like it said minus 21." My voice quivered, and I tried not to urinate in my pants.

He glared at me and bared his teeth like an angry dog. "Your punishment will be to clean the school toilets after classes finish on Saturday. Also, your parents will be informed of this transgression." Oh, no. Mama might have forgiven me, but Papa would have been terribly disappointed. He was paying so much for this school. Why were these people so cruel? Why?

I suffered through the winter months and prayed for the return of summer because I was totally exhausted by the relentless classwork, homework and totalitarian atmosphere.

When early June finally arrived, I boarded the little train one bright morning in Kadri and hoped that Albert would be at the station close to the estate to pick me up.

He was! I waved wildly and ran over to him. He looked triumphant, as if he had just outfoxed someone, and he flashed a sly smile, shook my hand and helped me into the horse carriage. I asked him how he was.

"I made a shotgun in my workshop this spring and my best friend got jealous and informed the police. Alex found out about it through connections in the police station and managed to inform me in time. I had just hidden the gun in the barn rafters when the police arrived. They ransacked our home and stayed around for a long time before they gave up the search, but they were forced to leave without making a confiscation or an arrest."

"I'll bet Papa doesn't complain about you not being a real man anymore." I grinned at him and admired his finely sculptured features and his inventiveness. I was very proud of him.

He laughed heartily. "You're right. He doesn't even complain when I play my instruments anymore. He just looks at me and walks away." I giggled and he put his arm around my shoulders and squeezed me for a few seconds. I was very excited because I knew we would go dancing together at the castles and come home at three in the morning when the sun rose. We were not even home yet and I was so thrilled about life that I could have danced right there in the carriage.

Papa smiled when he saw that my report card was quite good; it was not excellent, but it was above average. "This is not bad, Sonya. I see that you will be able to continue at this school. However, I expect you to help me out this summer by cooking dinner for my 20 workers. This will be a good opportunity for you to develop your natural leadership ability and sense of responsibility. Book learning is only a fraction of a total education." He lit his pipe and sat down at the dining room table.

"I look forward to cooking for the workers, Papa." I was so happy to hear that he thought I had natural leadership abilities. I didn't seem to be just a family clown anymore.

"Your mother and sister will show you how to make the meal." He patted me on the arm and walked to his room with my report card.

Mama hugged me and led me outside to the work area where Lara was cleaning vegetables. I was surprised to see her here because she was usually so busy in Tallinn. "Congratulations. Albert already told me that your marks were quite good." She looked as confident and as serious as ever, but her smile was warmer. Was it possible that my accomplished, auburn-haired beauty of a sister began to take me seriously? I hoped so.

I asked her to show me how to make the meal for the workers and she consented and gave me a large apron to wear. "Are you engaged yet? You have so many admirers," I said as I put on the apron.

She sighed heavily. "I have not met the right man. I need someone who is as down-to-earth and as serious about everything as I am, but I have not given up hope yet." I was so pleased that she confided in me.

I stared at the four huge buckets of vegetables I had to clean: the first one had potatoes, the second one had carrots, the third one had onions and the fourth one was full of cabbage. I would be cleaning all day. Would I be ready by three? I realized I would have to work as fast as I could and I also had to rinse a huge chunk of pork meat in vinegar water and bay leaves to get rid of the excess blood.

Lara showed me an enormous dark metal cauldron that looked like a container for a witch's brew, a slow fire seethed underneath it. "When you finish cleaning, you put everything in here. You must watch the fire carefully so that it doesn't get out of control. Oh, yes. I almost forgot. You must set the long table over there for 20." I saw the table sitting beside the spruce hedge just outside the garden. It was a lovely, sunny day and I looked forward to the challenge.

I managed to prepare the soup just in time. Right at three the workers arrived at the table and began eating some of the caraway rye bread that Mama baked for them. I filled the large soup bowls and carried them over to the table two at a time. The men talked loudly and gesticulated a lot and they were all stocky with blond hair, blue eyes and ruddy complexions.

When they finished eating, they praised me and it felt wonderful to be genuinely appreciated by so many people. One of them said, "Mr. Karl even has his youngest child working for us. He and his family really care about workers." All of them nodded vigorously in agreement.

Another man projected his powerful voice as if he were giving a sermon about eternal damnation to a congregation. "You and your family have been so good to us that if there is any political trouble in our country you will all be spared." My smile faded. What did he mean? He shook his fist in the air, his eyes narrowed, and his face became scarlet red. "Many landowners and city capitalist pigs treat workers like us cruelly. We are fed up of that. These foreigners have grabbed our lands away and they treat Estonian people badly. Now that we are free, we feel that everyone should work for the good of the country and give, give, give, not just take, take, take." The others all cheered loudly.

I left the workers to finish their dinner and ran to find Papa. He was in the dining room and I told him everything I heard from the workers and asked him about the patriotic wave of Estonianizing surnames. This all seemed to be connected in a web of anger.

"The workers are probably communists or communist sympathizers and they want the country to be run by locals only. I have a Swedish surname, but I am not going to change it. Don't you change it either, except when you marry. I'm proud of our name." He poured himself a topka of 45 proof vodka and downed it in one gulp.

"What did the worker mean by 'spared'?" I almost hated to hear the answer.

"He meant that we would not be killed." Papa did not look worried at all, but I felt terrified.

"Killed?" I whispered.

"The workers are just trying to act important. Forget about it. We are an independent democracy now, and there is no need for a revolution." I wished I could have felt as calm as he did. I could clearly see the thick purple veins on the neck of the worker who gave that macabre 'sermon' and I frowned.

"Here, have a topka of vodka to cheer up." Papa stroked my hair and gave me the topka. I knew better than to try and down it all at once and I enjoyed the burning sensation of the drink as it worked its way down to my stomach. Papa was probably right, but I worried anyway. What if Papa was wrong? What if a revolution of some sort was brewing? I relived the visit to the thief in Tallinn and visualized the Russian newspapers. Were our lives in danger? But we were good people, even the workers admitted that.

After I finished cleaning up after the workers, I decided to walk over to my godmother Inge's estate. She and her sister Wanda were the only relatives, apart from Mama and Papa, who really spoiled me and showered me with presents and I hoped the visit would help to wipe out the sinister images of revolutions from my mind.

It took about 45 minutes to walk over the low hills and sprawling wheat fields that separated our estate from Inge's.

When I arrived at the beginning of the long driveway, I stopped to admire the two rows of acacia trees that lined the road all the way to the mansion. There must have been at least 10 huge trees on either side. Honeybees swarmed around the lemon-yellow blossoms as if they admired the graceful flowers as much as I did. There was no wind at all and I closed my eyes for a few seconds and breathed deeply. The semi-sweet aroma already consoled me, this place was too beautiful for a revolution.

As I walked up the driveway I thought about how lucky I was to have such an interesting godmother. Her brother was the governor of our county and his office was in the mansion and Inge herself was an assistant bank manager in one of the bigger banks in Tallinn. She was a magna cum laude graduate in economics from Tartu University.

Wanda, her younger sister, was a graduate in languages from Tartu University and worked for the Red Cross in Tallinn. The sisters had a luxurious apartment close to Kadriorg, the magnificent peach palace that Peter the Great built for his wife Kadri close to the beach at Pirita in Tallinn, and they stayed there during the week to be close to their work. They came back to the estate for some weekends and holidays and I knew they were back and wondered what they would give me.

I pounded on the massive brass door knocker that had the shape of a lion's head. Inge opened the door and said, "We must have telepathy. I was just going to come over to bring you a pair of leather shoes I bought in the old town. Come in, come in."

"Shoes! You know how much I love shoes. Thank you so much."

"Come into the kitchen. Wanda is just finishing the icing for a cake. You are just in time for dessert and coffee." I followed her and admired her clothes. She wore a smartly tailored navy blue dress with a low neckline and blue leather pumps and two strings of pink pearls adorned her neck. She had the most extensive wardrobe in the county and she always moved with grace and authority.

Wanda saw me and put her icing knife down. "How nice to see you, Sonya. Please sit down. I will give you a slice of cake in a minute. What do you like in your coffee?" Wanda was the kind, maternal

type, it seemed she was always cooking for other people. She had stylish clothes that featured her petite body.

"Nice to see you, too. I take cream and sugar, please."

Inge showed me the shoes. They had low heels and were also made of blue leather. "Oh, these are so elegant." I gasped and held them up to the light. They felt sensuously soft and light. "Thank you, thank you. What can I do for you in return?" I knew that I could not possibly repay her but I had to be very polite in her presence.

"Nothing. But if you want, you can come to my office in Tallinn and do some typing for me. Would you like that?" She arched her eyebrows slightly and smiled.

"Oh, yes! I look forward to it." I didn't type well, but I was anxious to go there anyway because Tallinn was a very exciting city. The cake was delicious and these two ladies were always wonderful company.

Inge left the room for a minute and then came back with a stunning amethyst necklace. "My fiancé has just been appointed as the Estonian ambassador to Russia and he gave me this necklace a few day ago." The sun shone on it and projected so many dazzling squares of violet light all around the room that the walls sparkled with life. I reached out and touched one of the stones.

"And my fiancé just became a full-fledged reverend," Wanda said with a smile in her heart.

"I'm so happy for both of you. You deserve it," I said.

When the visit was over and I stepped out of the front door carrying my new shoes in a box, a shiny black car came up the driveway. Hardly anyone owned a car. Who were these people?

"Our fiancés!" Inge exclaimed. Two well-dressed men stepped out of the car and walked over to the house and as they greeted Inge and Wanda, I snuck over to the car and looked inside. The seats were all covered with burgundy red leather.

"May I sit inside for a few minutes?" I called out to them.

"Of course," Inge called back and the men nodded and smiled.

I sat in the back seat and let the soft leather caress my body. The aroma was tantalizing. I closed my eyes and fantasized about a future boyfriend who would own a luxury car and take me for rides in it.

Summer ended and school continued to be terribly demanding and exhausting because the teachers never relaxed their stranglehold on us and the subjects just got harder and harder. I had several good friends at school and my landlady continued to take good care of me, but I lived for the days when I could return to the estate for holidays. That enchanted place always soothed my soul and renewed my spirit.

I was 16 years old in the summer of 1938 and would start 11th grade in a few weeks. The dreaded month of September was almost here again, but I hoped my 17th birthday in October would bring something extraordinary into my life.

Chapter Four

I was mesmerized by my Russian teacher. She walked into class humming folk tunes, and if you made a mistake while orally conjugating a verb she just smiled, winked, and asked you to try harder.

One late September day she lectured us. "We are landlocked people, so our writers were forced to accurately observe real life. Writers like Tolstoy and Dostoyevsky concentrated on what they saw in the people around them. It is said that novels like *Anna Karenina* are based on true stories." I contemplated the profound, deeply moving Russian literature I read and fantasized about becoming just like a character from a Russian novel. After all, my teacher told me that I pronounced Russian perfectly and without a trace of a foreign accent. My name honored the memory of the last czar, and my music teacher showed me how to sing folk songs in a deep, velvety Russian style. I felt an intense bond with the Russian soul.

I winced when it was time to go to the Estonian teacher's class. She glared at me this year, as if there were something terribly disrespectful about my appearance.

As I walked into her class she shouted, "Whom are you trying to impress? You know that curls are not allowed in this school. You look as if you spent hours curling your hair. Is your mind on your studies at all this year? Go to the bathroom sink across the hall and wash out those curls right now."

"But, Madame, these curls are natural. They suddenly appeared last summer. I don't have to do anything to my hair." I ran my fingers

through the shoulder length, tightly wound maze of curls and hoped I didn't sound too arrogant.

"Nonsense! Go and wash them out. I will tell the headmaster if you don't." The sour, bitter look on her face indicated real trouble and there was no point in continuing to argue.

I walked over to the sink and thought about how unfair this all was. When I was a child, everyone made fun of me for looking on the ugly side of ordinary and now that I seemed to be a very attractive teenager, I still got hell for my appearance. Why did people react so much to looks? Why were they so obsessed with the visual aspects of things? Wasn't what is inside so much more important than what was outside? Animals knew that, and they loved you no matter what you looked like as long as they could trust you.

This teacher would get the surprise of her life because my curls became even wilder and fuzzier with washing. I would go back to class sporting a lion's mane and I wondered what she would have to say about that.

I attempted to dry my hair with a towel from the bathroom and then walked back into the classroom with my maze of damp, fuzzy curls. For once, the teacher was stunned into silence and her stern glare melted into an incredulous look of total bewilderment. She said nothing. No apology, nothing.

After class, my friends and other classmates crowded around me in the hall and whispered, "Suits her fine. But to think that there is no proper way for you to dry your hair here. How unfair."

"I know. I know all too well." I remembered the time I was kept after school in grade one. "I hope I don't catch pneumonia again." I felt my damp hair and shivered.

As we headed to the next class, my good friend Hilde took me aside and said, "Forget about that silly old witch. I have great news for you." She grinned broadly and her vibrant turquoise eyes sparkled. She was the most irrepressibly cheerful of all the 200 students in the school. She was bursting with contagious energy and her laugh could shake the dead. She had bouncy, shoulder length straw blonde hair and shapely legs that attracted boys and men from everywhere,

and she loved the attention. Just looking at her made me feel better already. No one would have ever believed that she lived with her family in one of the gloomiest apartments in town.

She drew me closer to her and said, "I happen to know for sure that the richest young man in town cannot stop looking at you. I see him ogling you on the way to school."

"I haven't noticed anyone staring at me." I tried to visualize my walks to and from school, but nothing unusual appeared in my mind.

"He goes to the co-educational high school and he's in grade 12. Oy, yoi, yoi, you should see how he ogles." I laughed at the way Hilde rolled her eyes toward the ceiling and clicked her tongue.

"You are so funny," I giggled.

"You wait and see," she said as she walked and grinned.

Soon after I turned 17, I met another good friend on the way to school. Greta attended the co-educational school but always took the time to talk to me when our paths crossed outside. Her parents owned a fabric factory in Kadri and she very much enjoyed living with them in town. She was tall, had honey blonde hair, was an excellent student and loved to plan and attend parties.

She grabbed my arm and looked right into my eyes. "You've got to come to our dance on Saturday night. It's two weeks from now, it's only for grades 11 and 12, and your school is invited. There will be an orchestra playing, there will be all sorts of refreshments, oh, it's all so exciting. I won't take 'no' for an answer." She smiled radiantly.

"Of course I'll come. Why not?" Greta's enterprising personality was infectious.

"Wonderful! Come to my place at eight and we'll walk over from there." We waved at each other as we headed in opposite directions and I felt lucky to have such loyal friends.

I took the train back to the estate a week before the dance and Mama laughed when I told her I had nothing to wear. "You can try on my best dresses and we'll see which outfit is the most flattering."

I thanked her and rushed over to her bedroom. I tried on a royal blue dress with cherry red velvet bows. It had puffy sleeves, was

straight and narrow down to the thighs and then flared out in thick folds. I wore the matching cherry red leather pumps.

"You look like a model," Mama said proudly.

"Thank you," I said as I began to dance the tango with an imaginary partner. Albert taught me all the dances, and we won three dance contests during the summer. Mama clasped her hands with delight.

"Some people will be hopelessly enchanted by you on Saturday night, but stay strong." She smiled slyly and I thought of her psychic power. Did she know something already?

When Greta and I arrived at the multi-purpose room of the two-floor brick high school the orchestra was already playing and dozens of smartly dressed students were there already and more were streaming in.

Greta introduced me to several of her classmates and smiled when she pointed out one young man who stood a few meters to our right. "That is Adam. He is very good in math and science and wants to become a pilot. He lives with his parents here in Kadri."

Another young man asked me to dance and as we whirled around the floor, I noticed that Adam stared at us without smiling. He was of medium height, had dark hair, high cheekbones and a penetrating gaze and his lips were curled in a slightly petulant, but sensuous and intriguing manner. He wore a dark brown three-piece suit.

After I danced with five or six different partners, Adam walked over to me and said, "May I have the pleasure of this dance?" He kissed my hand lightly and clicked his heels together. No one had ever done this before and I tingled with delight.

The orchestra played a foxtrot, Adam led me to the floor and we began to dance. "I'm not a very good dancer. That is why I did not ask you before." He enunciated his words very clearly but still did not smile. He danced adequately, but he was definitely not as comfortable on the floor as I was.

After the one foxtrot, he led me away from the dance floor toward the refreshment stand and everyone in the room stared at us. Some people even had their mouths wide open and none of the girls were laughing or even smiling.

He picked up two sodas and led me out into the schoolyard. I was too excited to feel cold, in spite of the crisp October evening. There was a bench under a gigantic oak and we sat down on it and he gazed at me without smiling. "I really must talk to you. I have noticed you for weeks now on the way to school." So, was this the young man Hilde spoke of? It must have been. He didn't ask me if I ever noticed him. "You are the most stunning girl I have ever seen. With your gorgeous halo of platinum hair, you look like the sun. Even your eyes seem to send out sunbeams. You take my breath away." He sounded intense and sincere.

I was speechless and looked down at my shoes. All I could say was "Thank you." No one had ever spoken to me like that.

"You must come to the party at my house two weeks from tonight at seven. Everyone will be there." He sounded insistent.

"I suppose I will," I said shyly.

"Excellent! I would not take 'no' for an answer anyway." He sure had pluck and I liked that.

He gave me the directions to his house and his breath crystallized in front of him. I shivered a little and he noticed immediately and led me back to the dance floor. "I'm sorry. I hope you're not too cold."

"I'm fine." I smiled at him as I felt my cheeks burning.

We danced to a slow waltz, and as we glided around the floor I could almost feel the sharp glares of the girls on my back.

The glares continued for the rest of the evening and when the orchestra finally stopped Adam shook my hand warmly and said, "Don't forget. Seven o'clock." It sounded like a command. I nodded and smiled.

Greta and I walked to my landlady's house, and on the way she told me more about Adam. "His father was a judge who died in court of a heart attack. He then received a very large amount of insurance money and his mother soon married an industrialist. Adam is the only heir to a fortune. He is already a millionaire and stands to inherit even more money. Most of the girls are after him, and to think that he spent most of the evening with you." She looked at me

affectionately. She herself did not seem to be jealous of me. But now I knew why everyone stared at us continuously.

We parted in front of my house and promised to meet at Adam's party in a couple of weeks.

I walked up the stairs to my room and sat on the bed. Nothing in my entire life had been as exhilarating as this evening, but it was also unsettling. Was this whole episode a dream? Did Adam really exist, and if he did, would he still be attracted to me at his party? Would he shun me after realizing that he had perhaps acted on an uncontrollable impulse?

I had to wear another beautiful dress for the party so that I would at least feel self-confident enough to handle any crisis. But it did feel wonderful to be noticed and admired by so many people. Even my family treated me with more respect after I blossomed into an attractive teenager.

Mama bought a flashy, emerald green taffeta dress for me a few days before Adam's party. "Look radiant, but don't let anyone take advantage of you," she said as she waved her finger at me. I looked at her carefully because she was always right.

I approached the most secluded mansion along the river in Kadri and was sure that this was Adam's house. It was surrounded by a two meter high evergreen hedge, the black wrought-iron gates were open, and I walked up to the carved double doors of the two floor, massive villa and knocked.

A lady servant wearing a black dress and a white apron opened the door and asked me to come in. Adam appeared as soon as she took my coat. "I've been waiting anxiously for you. Where have you been?" He took my hand and ushered me down a long entrance hall that had thick, purple Persian rugs on the floor and gold-framed, artistic oil paintings on the walls. The main living room on my right had French Provincial furniture and French doors leading out to a spacious veranda.

I laughed softly. "It's only seven thirty."

He looked at his wristwatch. "At least you're finally here." He was real and was not ignoring me and I hoped my face was not flushing.

We turned to the left and entered a second living room. A shiny, black grand piano sat on a floor covered by rhombus-shaped black and white tiles and a young man played the piano very well while several couples danced. Everyone stared as we entered the room.

Adam patted the pianist on the shoulder. "Meet my good friend Paul. His job is to play the piano and keep us entertained all evening."

Paul grinned as he played and said, "So you're the famous Sonya. I've heard a lot about you."

"Oh, no." I laughed nervously.

Adam danced one waltz with me and then stopped. "I must confess, I really don't like dancing. Would you like to have a tour of the house?" Just as I began to agree to walk around with him, another young man snatched me away to dance and we whirled around the floor. Adam stared at us wistfully.

Other men asked me to dance and I couldn't refuse. Adam continued to stare, but I enjoyed myself anyway. What a pity he didn't like to dance.

More and more people streamed into the room, and the noise level increased markedly.

When the music stopped for a few seconds, Adam made an announcement. "We've run out of beer, so I'm going to our brewery to get more. I know the night watchman and he won't mind. Sonya, will you come with us?" He looked hopeful.

"Of course," I said. I was very curious and I wanted to get to know him better.

Adam, two of his friends and I rode in a carriage for about three kilometers to the brewery, which was an imposing brick building. I was already impressed.

Adam banged on a window with a big stick. "We need more beer. Now!" He hollered.

The watchman opened the front door and helped to load the carriage with beer bottles. He was very polite and did not complain at all.

Adam sure was used to getting his own way. Mama and Papa would never have allowed me to act like that. This was very exciting. What would happen next?

When we arrived back at the mansion, we were greeted with loud cheers. Beer flowed again and 50 people were having a fantastic time. Arms and legs seemed to fly in all directions as the dancing became more and more vigorous and explosive laughter shook the room. How much longer would Paul be able to last at the piano? He was still grinning and his fingers still moved quickly.

A servant with a tray passed delicious snacks around and shook her head slowly and said, "My God, these young people are dancing and carousing as if the end of the world was coming tomorrow." Images of the hateful communists and the gypsy suddenly flashed through my mind. Stop it, stop it, I told myself. I brushed them aside.

Adam asked me to stay until the very end of the party.

When everyone was gone except Paul, we looked at the floor and groaned because the white tiles were covered with black shoe marks and the black tiles were covered with brown dirt. "My parents are coming back from Tallinn in the morning. We have to do something." Adam shook his head.

Adam, Paul, two servants and I knelt down and scrubbed the tiles with soapy rags. Laughing as we talked about the party, we managed to clean and revitalize the floor after a lot of hard scrubbing.

After Paul left, Adam led me to the hall and stood under one of the oil paintings. "We must see each other frequently." He was intense.

"Yes. I hope so." I smiled sweetly. This was amazing.

He walked me back to my landlady's house and stopped in front of the door. He kissed me on the cheek and then on my right hand. "I will call you very soon." He looked eager and sincere and I tingled all over.

I couldn't concentrate much in class the week after Adam's party. I daydreamed about movies of Sarah Leander and tried to imitate her sophisticated, sexy appearance and deep, velvety voice.

I thought it would be fun to cheer up the class before the teacher walked in and my classmates urged me to perform.

I slinked around the room and crooned:

"Der Wind hat mir ein Lied erzählt
von meinem Herzen das mir fehlt"

The class was spellbound. "More! More!" They all cheered. I continued:

"Ich war vielleicht noch nie verliebt
Alles war nur Flirt nur Scherz"

When I finished, I heard a lot of loud clapping. I turned around sharply toward the door and saw a group of smiling teachers. But they hardly ever smiled. "You should be an actress," one of them said and the others nodded in agreement. What a relief. No punishment this time.

The home room teacher asked me, "Do you know the meaning of the words you were singing? You certainly pronounced them well enough."

"Yes," I said and translated:

"The wind related a song to me
About what is missing in my heart.

Perhaps I have never yet been truly in love
Everything so far has just been a flirtation or a joke."

"Very good. You are learning your German." She allowed herself a half smile and I hoped that the love I was beginning to feel for Adam was not just a flirtation or a joke.

It was a cool, fresh afternoon in the middle of April. The snow was gone at last, and Father took me in his carriage to meet Adam's parents in Kadri.

I was very nervous, but Papa's admiring looks gave me courage. "I am very, very proud of you. You work hard at school and you have even managed to attract a young millionaire." He spoke slowly and

deliberately. "I always had faith in you." He gazed at me with his kind and wise grey eyes.

"Thank you," I said softly. Warm vibrations surged through my heart.

"I suppose you know that meeting his parents today will be a real turning point in your life. Adam must be serious about you."

"You think so?" I stared at the pines and the birches to see if they were hiding an answer to my question in the branches.

"Definitely. But just because they are industrialists does not mean that you should feel inadequate in any way. After all, our estate is very large and the czar awarded it to us. Keep your head up high." He looked insistent and confident.

"Yes, Father." I smiled at him.

"That's my girl." He held my left hand. "I will be waiting for you outside. In the meantime, I will go to town to buy supplies."

We arrived in front of Adam's mansion and Father helped me out of the carriage.

I waved goodbye and then walked on the flagstones leading up to the villa. I wore a conservative navy blue suit with a white collar. Would his parents really approve of me or would this meeting be an embarrassing disaster?

A familiar lady servant opened the door and ushered me into the hall. Adam was standing to my right in a dark grey suit and he immediately took my hand and led me to the formal living room that had the elegant French Provincial furniture.

Adam's mother was short and extremely dignified. She wore a conservative green dress and a genuine diamond necklace that sent little rainbows all around the room. His father was tall and thin and wore a smart dark blue suit with a silk scarf around his neck. They both looked kind and they stared at me with what seemed to be awe and admiration. Could this be true? What were they really thinking?

The servant brought coffee and French pastries with a service made of pure, gleaming silver and I was so nervous I wished I could have gobbled up three pastries at once, but the aroma of fresh coffee wafted over to me and soothed me.

We conversed for about an hour and I told them about my plans to study at Tartu. They seemed to be impressed.

When it was time for me to leave, his mother smiled gently, touched my hair and said, "An angel has blessed our house." I smiled also and Adam and his father gazed at me as though they agreed with what she said. This was too good to be true.

I stole a glance at the wide veranda with the white wicker garden furniture. Beyond it was an ornate gazebo under a weeping birch and beside the river. Could it be that this lovely place would eventually be my home?

For his graduation from high school, Adam received a brand new, black Mercedes sedan (he was a year older than I) and one gorgeous, sunny day in the middle of June we headed toward the resort city of Narva at the far eastern end of the country.

The luxurious beige leather seats reminded me of the wish I made when I sat in the fabulous car at Inge's house. I actually had a boyfriend of my own with a car like that now. My wish came true!

I reveled in the aromas of fresh leather and sea water. Our windows were fully open and I could clearly see the bluish green water crash against the bone white sand. Adam looked as ecstatic as I felt and he was driving far too fast and I loved it.

A few hours after leaving Tallinn we pulled up in front of a three floor, lemon-yellow Baroque palace with creamy white ornamental curves. He told me that this was Narva's most luxurious seaside resort and every window had a black wrought-iron balcony.

We jumped out of the car with our luggage and ran toward the hotel. We leapt up the stairs and rushed toward the registration desk. We grabbed the keys and hurried up to the rooms so that we could change into bathing suits.

Our rooms were right next to each other on the second floor and we burst into my room first and ran toward the window. "I told you we would have a sea view," he said and laughed. I squealed with delight, the sea was a shimmering silvery blue from here.

He rushed out to check his own room. "I'll be back in a minute," he said breathlessly.

My drapes were made of silvery gold brocade to match the bed cover. I pulled the cover away from the pillows. Pink silk sheets! I sighed with pleasure and closed my eyes. What a life I had now. But I thought I deserved it.

He burst through the door. "My room is just like yours."

"Good!"

"I'll meet you in the hall in a few minutes."

We raced down to the beach and jumped through the water. I cupped my hands and splashed his face with strong jets of water and then tried to run away in a serpentine manner, but he soon caught up with me and tickled me. We were overcome by paroxysms of laughter and we fell into the water. He put his arms around me and kissed me and I tasted the salt water on his sensuous lips.

In the early evening we sat down to a candlelight dinner and were serenaded by the house orchestra. "We have so many fascinating places to visit together. Just think. Leningrad is just next door. I can't wait to take you there." He held my hand across the round table and I gazed at him over a vase full of canary yellow roses.

"Father tells me it is an extraordinary city, but I guess we have to wait and see what Hitler plans to do next. The situation is so unstable now." I sighed.

"It will clear up soon. And even if it doesn't, our country will remain neutral. Nothing will happen to us. You'll see." He squeezed my hand. Was he right or were we on the brink of some volcanic upheaval? I looked around the palatial dining room. But everything was so fantastic right now. Indeed, what could possibly happen to us?

Chapter Five

Father bought a spacious apartment in a sturdy, medieval stone building in the old town for the family so that we could visit Tallinn without having to always stay with Aunt Lara and Uncle John.

It was around noon on August 24, 1939 and I was enjoying a visit with Lara, who was living in the apartment. We turned on the radio to hear some news and the nervous voice of the announcer told us about the August 23 Molotov-Ribbentrop pact in which Hitler signed a non-aggression pact with Stalin. His voice quivered as he spoke. "The Soviets are free to march into the Baltic republics whenever they please."

Lara shrieked in terror and held my hands, her face drained of color, she trembled, and I tried to steady her hands even though I was also deeply shaken. "At least we will all help each other and stay loyal to each other. We have a wonderful family. They cannot separate us and they cannot take away our estate. That is our temple and our refuge. We can be self-sufficient on that land, as Father often says." I tried to steady my own voice.

I helped Lara wipe away her tears with a handkerchief, put my arm around her, and when she recovered a little, she said, "You are right. We have each other and the land. I'm so glad you can always see the positive side of things." I hoped I was right.

We left the apartment and walked over the cobblestone streets to the aristocratic coffee house where she worked. She wished she would not have to work after hearing the news, but she had no choice.

As soon as we sat down in her office, I started helping her with the elimination of piles of paperwork and I worked quickly.

"I am so grateful to you." She looked exasperated. "There is so much work I don't know how they expect me to do it all by myself." She was a high-strung perfectionist who was appreciated and respected by the owner, so she got a very good salary.

After about an hour, she asked me if I would like a coffee break. She respected me now and was genuinely affectionate. She was never as much fun as Albert was, but I liked her very much anyway. Albert and I shared the same sense of humor and we were very close. Lara couldn't help it if she was the serious type.

As we entered the dining room, we heard the increasingly loud sound of men singing and shouting in the streets and the pianist stopped playing to listen.

We looked out of the windows and saw a group of about 20 men who looked like the thugs who tried to steal our horse. They were sloppily dressed and unshaven and they shouted out communistic songs.

"What bums. They want everything for nothing," Lara said.

As they passed by our window, I shuddered. There was a look of intense hatred in their eyes and they shook their fists in our direction. Lara sighed and moaned. "Can't we ever have peace?"

We drank our coffee in total silence. I felt sorry for those men, but I didn't think good people like us should have had to live in fear because of them.

A few days later I visited Adam at his house in the morning and found him in a state of uncontrollable rage, he hurled ashtrays at walls and kicked furniture. I winced at the racket; his parents must have been away again. "Goddammit! I had just passed the entrance exams and the interview for the School of Aviation and now it's closed. I could kill Stalin with my bare hands. That son-of-a-bitch." I just stared at him. His eyes were glazed, he was in his own world, and there was no point in talking to him. "I'm going to call Paul and Johann and get them to drive to the border with me to give hell to the Russkies."

This was a ridiculously foolhardy thing to do, but I knew it was useless to try to stop him.

Much later, in the evening, the three men returned and told me what happened. Paul started, "We borrowed a jeep and some bullhorns and drove to the eastern border. Adam yelled, 'Russkie, stay away in your own filthy backyard. Go to hell,' at the Russian border guards, but no one took a shot at us." He giggled mischievously and this whole episode seemed so surreal that I burst out laughing even though I knew that it was anything but funny.

"Don't do that again. I wouldn't want anything to happen to any of you," I told them. Especially Adam. Wouldn't it have been insane to lose him now just because he was so impulsive?

"I can't guarantee that we won't do it again," Adam said. All I could do was hope that he would be lucky again and encounter guards who didn't want to waste bullets on young "lunatics."

I could not start my last year of high school because the Soviets closed the schools. I had to find something else to do. Perhaps I could work in a pharmacy. They couldn't close pharmacies, could they?

The whole family, including Uncle Thomas and his wife, gathered around the radio in the evenings at our estate to try to figure out what was happening. All we knew was that there was tremendous confusion everywhere in the country.

One evening in early September, Albert told us, "Apparently, Russian communists have joined forces with our own local communists and this coalition is now running the country. President Päts is just a powerless figurehead now." I never saw him look so serious before.

Mother banged her fist on the dining room table. "I knew it. The thugs were waiting for an opportunity like this. Remember the communist newspapers?" She looked directly at me and I nodded. "They must have known it was coming and that is why they were so arrogant."

Aunt Lara and Uncle John shifted nervously in their chairs and blurted out, "Can we bury our valuables in your garden? We hear

reports of Russkies and locals grabbing whatever they can find in people's homes."

Albert's serious expression faded and was replaced by a hopeful smile. "Of course. I'll bury them with our own valuables. Anyway, this insane situation can't last forever." His positive attitude seemed to placate the older people, who were far more devastated by the situation than we were. Albert and I just kept hoping for the best.

"I wonder if the Germans will eventually march into the Baltics and throw the Soviets out," Uncle Thomas said in a pensive but hopeful voice.

"At least we would get rid of the communists if that would happen," Father said as he stroked his mustache.

I couldn't believe that this precarious situation would last too long. I was sure life would soon become wonderful again.

In October I found work as an apprentice in the famous pharmacy of the old town square which first opened in the 1400s. I also found work in the pharmacy of Kadri. No one knew how long the schools would be closed, so I was happy that I would at least gain some practical knowledge of pharmacy.

Both pharmacies were equipped with large labs and storage rooms. There were hundreds of bottles containing liquids and powders of every color imaginable, but the labels were all in Latin and I had to take private lessons in order to be able to read them.

Professional pharmacists showed me how to make various prescriptions by combining chemicals in the lab, everything had to be made by hand. It would take years to learn how to make all those medicines, but I enjoyed the challenge and both chief pharmacists I worked for had a keen sense of humor which was not crushed by the war. Working for them was inspiring.

I spent the next several months working in the two pharmacies and learning how to identify useful herbs that could be used to make medicines. Roaming around in the beautiful countryside with patient teachers helped to dispel the gloomy atmosphere of uncertainty. When would this bloody war end?

I continued to see Adam. Even though he was still devastated by the closure of the School of Aviation, he took private lessons in math and science and technical subjects because he wanted to excel when the school opened again. His affection toward me seemed to still be very intense and I was elated about that.

Lara continued to be a loyal and caring sister and I traveled frequently to Tallinn to work in the pharmacy and to help her with her accounts.

Inge asked me to help her in her bank office once a week. In spite of my poor typing skills she seemed to appreciate me and paid me well. I ran out with the money to buy flashy clothes when I could find them.

Inge fascinated me. She was always impeccably dressed, was an indomitable perfectionist, and anyone who worked for her really had a hard time pleasing her. Several people had to do their work over and over again before she would accept it. The manager himself respected her very much and often said that it wouldn't be long before she would be the manager of her own bank.

I got away with my imperfect typing because she had always reserved a special place in her heart for me. She gave me useful advice about everything. However, if I would have been there every day, I'm sure she would have been more demanding.

In May of 1940, the radio news told us that the war was spreading and becoming more violent and we were warned to expect cataclysmic events. It seemed that we would not escape real horror. But we were just a small and neutral country. What had we done to deserve this?

I typed for Inge in her bank office one balmy afternoon in early June. When I stopped to check the spelling of a word I heard distant shouting and looked up from the typewriter. The other workers also stopped working and tried to listen to the mysterious sound. There was total silence in the bank now except for the radio in the manager's office.

The distant shouting rapidly got louder and turned into an ominous roar, we also heard metallic grating sounds and felt the build-

ing shake a little. Was there an earthquake? We rushed over to the windows and saw hundreds, no, probably thousands of people marching in the streets behind several dark tanks whose guns looked as if they were ready to rape the country.

As the tanks and the marchers approached and the roar became thunderous, we also heard the shattering of glass as windows were smashed. Many bystanders were screaming and the marchers were shouting out communistic songs. I remembered the time I visited Lara at the coffee house, but there were so many more of them now. My God, it sounded like a revolution. What was going on?

The bank manager stumbled out of his office. Hyperventilating, he managed to announce to us, "Stalin has officially occupied the country. Soviet soldiers are marching through the streets to celebrate the occupation and our own communists are right behind them. I just heard this on Radio Free Estonia." Everyone gasped sharply at once.

Now the crowd came into full view. Tall giants marched right behind the tanks, and one of them carried a Soviet flag. Most of the tall men were white Russians, but many of the shorter soldiers were Mongols with bronze skin and slit eyes. All the soldiers were heavily armed and we stole glimpses of local communists. Sure enough, they were the same types who shook their fists at Lara and me. Unshaven, sloppy bums. I remembered the workers on Father's estate who told me that my family would be spared in case of an uprising.

These men didn't look like they would spare anyone, they were total fanatics who were beyond reason. This was the most horrifying sight I had ever witnessed. My breaths were very shallow and my legs shook uncontrollably.

Inge grabbed my perspiring hand. "We are leaving now through the back door. Come with me." Her voice did not waver and I followed her without questioning her judgement at all. I was just grateful she held my hand.

We disappeared into the back alley. No one else was here and Inge took her high heel shoes off. We started running down the alley for about four blocks and then began to cross the narrow cobble-

stone street that ran in front of her bank. "They're going to see us, they're going to see us." My voice cracked.

"We have to cross this street in order to get to my apartment. They won't see us. Just keep running." Her voice was a little steadier than mine and I was amazed at her courage.

As we leapt across the narrow street, we saw hundreds of paper bills flying out of the bank windows and heard shrieks and gunshots above the general roar. Bluish smoke billowed out of the bank.

We ran desperately in the direction of Inge's apartment, my lungs hurt from breathing so erratically. We did not look back anymore and kept up a frenetic pace for at least 10 blocks.

We arrived at the apartment and leapt up the stairs to the second floor. Inge pounded on the door.

Wanda opened it and we burst into the apartment. Without a word, we gathered around the radio. The reception was uneven in volume and full of crackling and whistling sounds. An announcer told us, "This is the last broadcast of Radio Free Estonia. We now know that our president, Konstantin Päts, has been arrested and is on his way to Siberia. Our flag has been pulled down from the Pikk Hermann tower and is replaced by the Soviet flag." I remembered visiting the tower with Mother and swearing that I would try to pull down any conqueror's flag. Childish dreams. Our president on the way to Siberia? But he was such a good and noble man. Why? Why?

The broadcast continued, "A major bank in Old Tallinn was just raided by Soviets and locals. The manager was fatally shot, the vault was blown open and all the money was thrown out of the windows. Our money is now totally worthless." Inge, Wanda and I reached for each other's hands simultaneously. The broadcast faded, sputtered, and came back weakly. "If you work and live in Tallinn, do not try to leave the city. The Soviets will hunt you down. You must stay where you are." The reception then faded away completely and we just heard eerie whistling sounds.

Inge's voice was hoarse. "I am the assistant manager at that bank. They probably would have shot me as well." She stared at me and whispered, "They might have even shot you."

"How lucky we are that you decided to leave out of the back door." My lips were dry and I felt dizzy.

Wanda walked over to the sink and filled two glasses with water. "You both look like you need some," she said as she gave us the glasses. She always thought of others first.

I drank the water quickly and suddenly remembered that my parents registered my birth in Tallinn as well as in Kadri. I also had a job at the pharmacy in the old town square, so that meant I would have difficulty returning to the country estate. The Soviets would be looking for me, but I dreamt of returning to the estate. I longed for it because I always felt safe at that enchanted place.

"I want to go back to the estate. I must. I know a friendly couple who have a large house with a basement in a suburb not too far from here. Maybe I could hide with them before I venture back to the estate. Can I call them from here?" I looked at Inge eagerly.

"Must you do that? Do you have any idea how dangerous this is?" Wanda paled and stared at me in disbelief.

"We will both lose our sleep worrying about you," Inge said anxiously as she walked over to the sink to get more water.

I called the couple and they agreed to hide me for a while until the situation stabilized enough for me to get home safely.

I said goodbye to Inge and Wanda. "Thank you for saving my life," I told Inge as I gazed into her eyes. They still didn't want me to leave.

The soldiers seemed to be mainly in the city center, so it seemed to be relatively safe to try to walk to the suburb where the couple lived. I didn't dare take any kind of public transportation and I walked very quickly and kept looking all around me like a hunted animal.

After about 15 blocks I arrived at the house. The husband greeted me at the door quietly and pulled me into the hall. The wife soon appeared and ushered me over to a small bedroom. There was a thick rug on the floor, and the man lifted up half of it to show a hatch door that blended in with the floor. He pulled on the flat metal handle and lifted the door and I saw stairs leading down to the basement. "We sealed off the outside entrance to the basement long ago because we anticipated trouble."

I followed the man down 10 stairs and arrived in a pleasant room, all the windows were covered with thick beige curtains embroidered in bright folk patterns. There was a child's bed in one corner and it had a bedcover embroidered with yellow and orange flowers. There was a slight musty smell in the room, but it was bearable. A commode sat next to the bed.

The man spoke clearly but kept his voice very low. "There is still some daylight seeping through the windows, but I cannot allow you to have any lights down here for the night." I nodded vigorously. "I'm sure you understand why. Also, you cannot make noise of any kind. You cannot have a radio. We will call you to come up for meals when we think it is safe, but at the first sign of trouble you will come down here again. You will bring up the commode pot in the morning and my wife will flush the wastes down our own toilet."

"Thank you so much. You are risking so much to help me. How can I ever repay you?" I touched his arm gently.

"Let's wait and see. After you are safely back at the estate, we will think of something. Now I imagine you want to rest. You have had an incredible day." He walked up the stairs and carefully let the hatch door down. I heard the rug slap the floor as he covered the hatch with it.

As I lay down on the bed and looked at the curtains, Adam appeared in my mind for the first time since the cataclysmic events in town. Where was he right now? What was he doing? Did he miss me and wonder where I was? I hoped so. How I wished he were here in hiding with me. I hugged my pillow and pretended it was Adam and dozed off.

I woke up after a heavy sleep. I had seen Mother in my dreams, she reached out to me with her arms and told me to come home.

It seemed to be daytime, but I didn't dare move the curtains. I only moved my head so that it was at eye level with the windowsill. Yes. It was daytime, but what time was it?

I heard muffled footsteps and some commotion above me. The hatch door opened and I saw the wife's face peering down at me. "How did you sleep?" She spoke softly and affectionately.

"Fine. Thank you. This bed is very comfortable," I whispered.

"We will have breakfast ready in about half an hour."

"Thank you." Suddenly I was ravenously hungry and my stomach growled.

I sat at the kitchen table with them, all the curtains were drawn. I admired the pork sausages, potatoes, eggs, dark bread and preserves, and the aroma made my stomach growl even more.

Just as I started sipping coffee, we heard heavy pounding on the front door. Without a word, the man led me to the hatch door and prepared for me to go down the stairs. Our movements were quiet, stealthy, and at the speed of light.

I stood right below the hatch door and strained to hear what was going on upstairs, the couple seemed to be talking to two men and I was terrified that they might have been soldiers searching for people in hiding. The conversation lasted for about five minutes.

I waited in silence for about half an hour before the man opened the hatch door. "You can come up again," he said. As I emerged, they told me, "There were two Soviet soldiers asking us if we know of any people in hiding in the area. Luckily, they believed us when we told them we know nothing." He smiled.

I gulped down my lukewarm breakfast and then went back down to my room. I would get back to the estate. Definitely. I had so much to live for, and I was sure the soldiers would give up in a few days. Surely they had more important things to do, didn't they?

I picked up some paper and a pencil and began to draw some of the heart-chilling scenes I witnessed recently. It helped me to deal with my seething emotions. The more I drew, the more optimistic I felt.

After five days of living in this basement, the couple told me that they were ready and willing to disguise me if necessary so that I could get back to the estate safely. They were incredible people.

I was so determined to get there that I was even willing to walk the roughly 100 kilometers back.

The next several days were spent drawing and reading magazines. It couldn't be much longer now, could it?

Ten days after I arrived in their house, the couple told me that there was so much confusion in Tallinn that it was safe to attempt an escape out of town. They gave me a good breakfast, some money and wished me luck. I promised to pay them back and thanked them profusely.

I walked to the electric train station across the street. No soldiers were in sight and the train came soon and I boarded.

We soon arrived at the main train station in central Tallinn and from here I could take a regular train back to Kadri. I looked around anxiously, there were no soldiers milling around the station. I thanked God. There were just a few confused local policemen and I tried to look as confident as possible because I didn't want anyone to ask me any questions.

I boarded the regular train and no one asked me for identification papers. The couple were right, the confusion worked in my favor. I couldn't wait to get out of the station and see the trees and the lakes.

Soon we were out among the birches, the pines, the spruces, the lakes and the little waterfalls and I opened my window to breathe deeply. The natural perfume invigorated me and I even heard songbirds, the war did not silence them. I leaned back in my seat and sighed with pleasure.

When I arrived in Kadri, I found a friendly farmer who offered to take me back to the estate in his carriage. He let me off about one kilometer away from home.

I laughed as I greeted the trees, their limbs were outstretched in that familiar, eternal welcome. The rusty brown dirt road felt so soft and warm on my feet.

My parents and Albert were beside themselves with joy when they saw me. We sat down in the kitchen and I told them about my adventures. Apparently, Adam came by several times to ask about me and I was happy about that.

The next morning my parents, Albert and I rode in the carriage to Kadri to buy farm supplies and on the way over we spoke about a hopeful end to the war and how we couldn't wait to enjoy total freedom again.

As we approached the town, we were inundated by a revolting stench of human feces and cattle excrement. I leaned over the rim of the carriage and vomited out my breakfast while the others coughed.

Then we heard piercing shrieks and penetrating moans of agony. There must have been hundreds of people in some sort of terrible anguish. What was this? Some monstrous accident? Our horses neighed fearfully.

We stopped close to the farm supply store and then clearly saw the full horror. There must have been over a thousand women and children and a few old men being herded like animals into the filthy cattle trains that were waiting on the tracks.

The farm supply store-owner ran over to us. "Those trains are headed for Siberia. Our own communists betrayed those poor souls to the Soviets, claiming they were 'enemies of the people'. Get back to your land now. Go!"

"But none of those people can be capitalist pigs. Why were they really chosen?" Albert was mortified. We all were.

"The Soviets and our own communists want more living space for themselves. Some people were chosen simply because of pure hatred and jealousy. Go! Go, I tell you." The store-owner was perspiring heavily and his face was contorted with pain.

I glanced at a gray stone church tower a few blocks away from the tracks. How could God let this happen? I looked up at the sky and silently asked him how he could let Satan win.

If death was imminent, I wanted to be shot on my own land. I didn't want to hurtle toward unknown horrors in Siberia in a rattling trap of a foul-smelling death car and have the time to contemplate my fate. No. I wanted to die quickly in the place I loved most.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Albert said as he turned the carriage around. We headed back immediately, but we were haunted by the gut-smashing cries of the doomed souls.

Some desperate bystanders ran beside our carriage and moaned, "Please let us come with you. Please!"

"We do not have enough food for everyone. I'm terribly sorry." Father was in pain, but he had no choice.

Soon after we arrived home, Uncle Thomas ran over. "There is an eight o'clock curfew now. Isn't that unbelievable? We don't know who is going to be taken next. We're living under a reign of terror."

We all went inside and sat quietly around the kitchen table. There were no words strong enough to describe the depth of our pity for the innocent people on the cattle trains. We could only grieve in total silence.

On Aug. 6, 1940 we became an official part of the Soviet Union. This was a black day for many of us.

In September I started my last year of high school in a Soviet school. The grey, dismal building looked more like a hastily constructed military barracks than a school and was surrounded by barbed wire. There were huge pictures of Stalin and Lenin on the walls and next to them were photographs of our own Estonian communist leaders and my classmates and I spat at all of them as we walked by them.

I missed my old beloved Russian teacher. She would not have approved of Stalin or Lenin, I was sure of that. I missed all my old teachers. No matter how strict they were, they were preferable to the monsters who taught us now.

One day we noticed that the eyes of the portraits had been punched out. The old, greying janitor beckoned to us and told us that he allowed Adam and his friends to sneak in and do the job. He said he felt sorry for all us young people, that we didn't deserve a life like this and that he hoped the situation would improve soon.

At home we sat around the powerful radio in the evenings and listened to a German station from Belgrade. We kept hoping that the Germans would throw the Soviets out of Estonia and get rid of the communists and the men made bets on who would eventually run the country. We continued to live under a reign of terror, knowing that quite a few innocent people were still being deported to Siberia. Would we be next? Would the Germans invade and turn out to be just as cruel to us as the Soviets?

Over the next several months, the Soviets began to draft young Estonian men into their army. Many of the unwilling conscripts re-

ported to the officials and then hid in the forests to try to escape this hateful duty.

Adam came to the estate on a cool spring afternoon in late March of 1941. He was very depressed. "I have been called up by those bastards. Do you know of a really good hiding place somewhere around here?" He hugged me affectionately.

"You are in the right place. Come with me." I laughed. This was dangerous, but it was also very exciting.

I led him through our forest and we eventually arrived at a very thickly treed area that was almost impenetrable. It was one of my favorite childhood haunts and I began to push the needle-sharp branches aside. The trees were healthy and flexible, so some of the branches snapped back with great force and hit Adam in the face. "Yeoww!" He put his hands on his face to check for scratches while I laughed like a child because he looked so serious.

"Are you sure you know where we are going?" He was exasperated.

"I have a very special place in mind. Trust me."

After about half an hour of struggling through the thicket, we reached the small round clearing that used to be another one of my childhood playgrounds. I was stunned to see Albert, Alex, Paul and Evald aiming rifles right at us. I gasped.

"I told you it was Sonya. She laughs like a child," Albert told the others. They relaxed and put down their rifles. "You! You thought of this place, too? I can't believe it." My brother grinned and shook his head.

"Believe it. You know we often think alike," I told him. We both laughed. It was so good to see them all.

"I'm glad Albert recognized your laugh. We were ready to shoot, thinking you were Russkies," Evald said and laughed.

The gravel pit in the clearing was lined with fluffy sheepskins and thick tree branches covered the pit. We settled down for the night in the pit, which was surprisingly comfortable and warm.

"Where is Johann, do you know?" Adam asked Paul.

"His uncle takes care of the Kadri cemetery, so he goes to the cemetery annex and spends the night on a stone slab. His uncle locks

the iron gates every evening and no soldier wants to bother climbing over the fence to look for anyone in there," Paul laughed softly.

"That's a clever way to hide," Adam said. "Good for him."

In the morning, Mother appeared at the pit with baskets of food. When I emerged from the pit, she got a shock. "Not you. No! What are you doing here?" I told her the story. "You must come back with me. This place is far too dangerous for you. You could be raped and killed by Soviet soldiers. Please come back with me. You must." She grabbed my hands.

I hated to leave, but I acquiesced. As usual, Mother was right. We started the trek through the thicket.

When I woke up at home the next morning I noticed that Mother's dark auburn hair was now peppered with silver-grey streaks. This did not surprise me, she worried so much about all of us.

A couple of days later, she came back from the gravel pit and moaned. "Our men are gone. The Soviets must have arrested them. I can't stand it any more. This damn war makes me ill." Her face was very pale and her lips trembled.

"Maybe they found another hiding place." I tried to sound optimistic to cheer her up.

"I doubt it. That was the best possible place in the whole area." She fought back the tears. Then I started worrying. Would we ever see them again? Where were they? Were they suffering?

It was 10 days now since the men disappeared. I pulled the bucket up from the well in the windy afternoon and relived the time when Albert saved the two adorable kittens by lowering the chair with a rope. Where was he? Where were the others? My eyes moistened and my throat constricted painfully.

I rested the bucket on the rim of the well and sighed. Then I looked up and noticed a man walking over the little hill that separated our estate from Uncle Thomas's. His arms were waving wildly. I blinked a few times. It was Albert!

I ran over to him, we hugged vigorously and even danced the polka for a few seconds. "I'll tell you everything in the house. Are Mother and Father here?"

"Oh, yes!" He looked totally exhausted, but he was home.

He began his story as we all sat around him at the kitchen table. "The Soviets moved everywhere with powerful bullhorns and announced a declaration of amnesty. 'Come out of hiding, you will all be forgiven', they told us."

"We believed them, so we came out of the thicket and walked toward the back road. As soon as they saw us they grabbed us, took us to military barracks, dressed us in Soviet uniforms and sent us in military trains toward Russia. They split us up, so I rode with total strangers." I cringed. Where was Adam?

"I was looking out of the train window and wondering about what was going to happen to us in Russia when bombs started falling on the tracks. Our train was forced to stop. 'It's the Nazis', one of the others shouted. He saw the planes clearly."

"When the train stopped, some of us decided to try to escape. There was mass confusion everywhere, as you can imagine. There were deafening explosions and blue-grey smoke that made it difficult to see anything. There was a thick forest on either side of the tracks. I ran into it and climbed up a tall spruce. The Russkies kept searching for us and shouted through their bullhorns that anyone hiding should surrender immediately or be shot. I stayed up in that tree for about 24 hours."

Father patted Albert on the shoulder. "You need a good shot of vodka, my boy." He got up and poured him a full glass of Viru Valge. I was so glad to see how much Father really admired Albert now. He even looked as if he was suffering the same agony.

"We all need a good shot," Mother said. Her hair was almost completely silver now, even though she was still a young woman.

"You are right," Father said as he poured more glasses. Albert downed half-a-glass at once.

"When I was sure there was no more noise, I slowly got down from the tree and stood at the base to listen carefully for a while. My hands were scraped and painful and I was scared, but I was so hungry and thirsty that I started walking out of the forest. I crossed the tracks and eventually arrived at a farm."

"I saw a young woman milking a cow. I wasn't sure if I was still in Estonia or if I had already crossed over into Russia. I kept looking around for clues and I approached the woman very slowly so I wouldn't scare her too much. When she saw me, she got such a shock that she knocked the milk can over."

"When she got over the shock, she asked me who I was in Estonian."

"Ahhh!" We all breathed a collective sigh of relief. "You were not in Russia." Albert smiled at us.

"I calmed her down by speaking in a low, soft voice and using gentle language. She introduced me to her family. They fed me well, gave me civilian clothes and burned my Soviet uniform. I was so very grateful."

"I stayed on the farm for several days and helped them with their chores, but the poor young woman fell in love with me and the family wanted me to stay and marry her." I was not surprised, girls were always falling in love with Albert because he was so incredibly handsome and they could also sense that he was very kind.

"Where are the others, do you have any idea?" I was elated to see my beloved brother, but I was sick about Adam and the others.

"I don't know. All we can do is wait and hope for the best." He got up, picked up his violin and played a folk tune. Mother and I sang. There was hope in the music.

In the middle of April I found out that Adam and Paul were back with their families after walking across farmlands for days. They had similar escape stories. But Alex and Evald were not back and no one knew anything. I worried terribly.

We also heard rumors about the imminent advance of the Nazis into Estonia and our Jewish population made a frantic mass exodus to Russia. Would they really be much better off there?

Adam took me to his house for a visit one evening and I noticed two more concert grand pianos in the party room with the black and white tiles. They were magnificent instruments. "Where did they come from?" I asked him.

"A Jewish family gave them to us for safe keeping. They hope to come back from Russia when the pandemonium is over." I ran my fingers along the smoothly varnished instruments and dreamt about parties, gorgeous clothes, a pharmacy job, my future with Adam and the end of the war.

He put his arms around me and squeezed me as hard as he could. "I love you," he said and kissed me on the mouth for a long time. "Do you love me?"

"Yes. Very much." We kissed again and I was in ecstasy.

"I wish we would never be separated like that again. The thought of you gave me the courage to escape from that train."

"You cannot imagine how I worried about you." I rested my head on his shoulder.

I finally finished high school at the end of May, but the reign of terror continued and no one knew what would happen next. Would the Nazis invade or not? But I was optimistic and whenever I was at the estate I felt that life would be wonderful again.

Chapter Six

It was a breezy, sunny afternoon in June, 1941, and Lara and I were listening to the radio and looking out of the windows of our Tallinn apartment. The Nazis were marching through the cobblestone streets to celebrate their occupation of our country. Hundreds of people were leaning out of windows, some were crying in fear and others were throwing flowers down to the streets. "Flowers! Some people are so naïve. Don't they know that more innocent people are sure to be killed?" Lara sighed heavily.

"I suppose they are just so happy to get rid of the communists." I certainly didn't miss them.

"We are just trading one evil for another. That seems to be our perpetual fate. There is always a conqueror's flag flying from Pikk Hermann. Will our own flag ever fly again?" Her eyes moistened as she looked out of the window in the direction of the tower.

"At least they're not sending people to Siberia," I said as I tried to cheer her up a little.

"They'll send them to concentration camps or just massacre them right here, you wait and see," she said. She sat down at the kitchen table and held her head with her hands.

It was July, and the Germans were firmly entrenched all over the country, but at least I could move freely from Tallinn to the estate and back. I still worked in the old town pharmacy and in the one in Kadri and I enjoyed learning more about how to make powders, pills, ointments, solutions and many other things. I was glad I would

have a good foundation in practical pharmacy by the time I studied at Tartu and I just hoped the university would resume regular classes soon.

Adam and Albert were drafted into the German army immediately and I never knew where they were going next because they only appeared at home occasionally and unpredictably.

Alex and Evald had definitely disappeared. I only heard rumors about them trying to escape from the country because many people were sure the Soviets would return. That was a thought too awful for words and I tried to brush it out of my mind.

Anyone who had a big house or an estate was obliged to accept officers as house guests, so we had an officer and three soldiers living with us now.

The officer was a fastidious dresser and had a personal valet who helped him get ready in the mornings and a chauffeur arrived in a long beige Mercedes to pick him up very early each day. Apparently, he was a commander and had daily meetings in Kadri and Tallinn.

The soldiers loved our estate and they helped us with chores in the fields and in the garden. One of them said, "We are amazed to see so many wonderful foods like smoked ham and whipping cream. You have a prosperous little country. We haven't seen foods like this for years because of the war preparations and restrictions back home."

Mother gave them some of the foods they craved and they were very grateful and said, "We hate this war. We don't want to go to the Russian front to die. We wish we could just stay here and work for you people."

One evening, the officer sat down at the dining room table for a drink with the family. He looked concerned. "The Kadri train station records show that up to 60,000 people had been taken to Siberia from this area when the Soviets were here. I hear reports of thousands and thousands taken from many other parts of the country. A very significant portion of your population has been removed." My parents and I stared at each other in agony. We didn't have to speak to know that we were all thinking of that gut-smashing day in Kadri when we saw and smelled the revolting cattle trains. If the

Soviets would return, this would happen all over again. I was gripped by fear. Maybe the war would not end soon and maybe we would all be taken away to Siberia.

Nineteen forty-three was almost over and the German occupation continued. The war situation was terribly unstable, but we just kept hoping for the best. We had to.

Where was Adam? I didn't hear from him often enough. Did he still love me? I expected to spend New Year's Eve with him, but it looked less and less likely. Even his parents didn't know where he was and they were very concerned.

I arrived at Aunt Lara and Uncle John's apartment in Old Tallinn to celebrate New Year's Eve. Lara was also here and as soon as I saw Uncle John I cheered up because he looked like a benign Norwegian troll. I laughed when I saw his crooked, gold teeth, slightly cross-eyed expression and wild mop of dark hair. He and Aunt Lara did not have children, so they behaved like children themselves, they were middle-aged and they still played tag on the beach and played practical jokes on each other all the time.

Lara was invited to a ball at the luxurious Estonian Theater for accountants and business managers, but she didn't want to go. "What's the point of dressing up for nothing? I have not met the right man in all these years, so what makes you think that tonight will bring a miracle?" She glared at Aunt Lara, who insisted that she should go.

"Don't be negative. You must learn to enjoy every day as if it were your last, because you don't know what is going to happen around here," Aunt Lara said stubbornly.

"She is absolutely right, Lara," Uncle John said and smiled. I laughed when I saw those teeth.

Lara's face brightened a little. "All right, I'll go," she said softly.

She emerged from the bedroom in a tight, black velvet dress, black patent heels and a white rabbit fur coat. Uncle John tried to whistle and Aunt Lara rushed over to her to hold her shoulders and look her up and down. "You look stunning. More beautiful than ever." I gazed at Lara in sheer admiration.

"I'll probably be back before midnight," she said as she closed the door. We heard her heels on the stairs.

I played cards with my aunt and uncle until the new year arrived. Then we drank champagne, kissed each other and cheered: "To Free Estonia! Happy 1944."

Lara was still not back at one thirty in the morning.

Around two, she burst into the apartment. "I'm in love. I have met the most wonderful man. We danced together all evening and we became engaged before the ball was over." We were all stunned into silence.

Finally, Aunt Lara said, "Who is this man? What does he do?" She was always very protective of Lara.

"He's the chief accountant at a soft drink factory in Tallinn." Lara's face glowed. "I'm so glad I listened to you and went to the ball." I was so happy for Lara because she really deserved a nice husband. Beautiful things were still happening in spite of the hellish war.

Lara wanted me to meet her fiancé a few days later at her office, so I walked over to the coffee house in the late afternoon and headed straight to the back room. She smiled at me and said, "This is Harald." A tall, thin man with kind, pale-blue eyes hiding behind little round glasses stood up quickly and shook my hand. It was a warm handshake and I liked him already.

We went to a small private table in the dining room for drinks and appetizers and mesmerizing music rose up from the concert grand piano, a German officer was improvising on popular tunes and the other guests stopped eating to listen in awe.

There were several high-ranking officers sitting at tables close to the piano platform and they were escorted by gorgeous local ladies who were dressed like *haute couture* models from Paris. I dreamt of wearing elegant clothes like that one day.

Harald observed carefully and then said, "Here in Tallinn, one can get the impression that the German occupation runs smoothly. It doesn't. I hear reports of terrible atrocities in the southern part of the country. Thousands of our own people and other prisoners of war have been cruelly executed and dumped in mass graves because

of sabotage and general resistance to the occupation. Some men were actually set on fire after they dug their own graves." Lara and I gasped.

"Harald, for God's sake, stop talking. They'll hear you," Lara said in a low soft voice.

"I'm sorry, you are right. I'll stop talking." I kept looking around the room to see if any of the officers were looking at us. Luckily, they were too involved with the music and the ladies, but it still took a long time for my heart to stop pounding.

It was a frosty, but sunny afternoon in late February and the whole clan came to Old Tallinn for Lara's wedding, which took place in a 13th century stone church.

Lara wore a pistachio green chiffon dress with a thin, black velvet belt and Harald wore a dark blue suit. They both looked supremely happy. The weak sunrays illuminated the stained glass windows and sent lovely patterns onto the floor. Life was getting better and would continue to do so, the organ music told me so.

Lara and Harald moved into a spacious apartment in a suburb very close to the old town and I was really pleased about that because I could easily walk over from the pharmacy to see them after work.

One afternoon in early March the chief pharmacist in the old town lab asked me to identify some solutions whose labels were missing because I was well appreciated here for my keen sense of smell. One of the bottles had a delightful peppermint fragrance and another had the unmistakable punch of sulfur. I thought I knew the ingredients and began to write them down on a piece of paper.

"Sonya, you have a visitor," one of the workers suddenly told me. I left the bottles and went to the front room. It was Adam.

"We must talk. Let's go for a walk." He looked insecure and was not quite himself. I wondered if he was in trouble with the Germans.

The chief pharmacist winked at me and said, "I'll finish the work. Go for a walk and I'll see you tomorrow."

I thanked him and smiled over my shoulder as we left.

Adam took my hand in his and led me across the square toward the church of St. Nicholas, the tower was white and had a striking, curvy black spire that reached for the sky.

I asked him how he was. "Fine," he said without conviction. What was bothering him? Why didn't he ask how I was? Was he in trouble or was he just being moody?

We entered through the grey Gothic stone door and I gazed at the ornate silver chandelier. I adored this church. The aroma of polished wood from the pews and the intricately carved altar pieces mixed with a centuries-old smell of human emotion and candle wax. So many people wept, laughed and worshipped here. Were their souls living in the stained glass windows? I could feel a special presence even though I didn't see anyone else.

Some well concealed person up on the organ loft was practicing a Bach toccata. We walked toward the altar piece, and the powerful vibrations bounced off the massive stone walls and penetrated my whole body. I shivered at the intensity of the religious rapture.

Adam quietly led me toward the enormous life-size, brightly colored Dance of Death mural. I was mesmerized by the powerful symbolism of the painting, a renaissance king, a queen, bishops and other nobles stood in a lovely meadow and triumphant skeletons clad in loose bright robes danced around royals and nobles who were clad in ermine, brocade and velvet.

"The queen looks as if she is ready to cry," I said.

"Why would she want to cry? She's a queen, isn't she? She's luckier than any of the other women." He embraced me. I still gazed at the queen. "Forget about the painting."

He gently turned my face toward his with his fingers and we gazed into each other's eyes. "Will you marry me?"

"Yes." I answered automatically and wrapped my arms around him. My dreams were coming true. He kissed my hands tenderly.

"I'm so happy," he told me.

"So am I," I whispered. We strolled around the church and listened to more Bach.

It was the evening of March 9. Adam was on duty somewhere and I dined with Lara and Harald at their Tallinn apartment.

"How wonderful that you are going to marry Adam," Lara said as she held Harald's hand at the table.

"We hope you will be as happy as we are," Harald said. "You deserve it." Genuine kindness radiated from his face.

"Thank you." I smiled.

"When exactly is the wedding?" Lara asked.

"Probably early June. It will be warm by then and the lilac blossoms will be everywhere," I said. "Your food is always gourmet. Thanks. I really enjoyed that." I wanted to savor the taste of chicken with orange peel, raisins, brown sugar and potatoes as long as possible.

"I'll put the radio on," Harald said as he got up. I helped Lara with the dishes.

Later in the evening we heard a special news report. "Soviet bombers are very close to Tallinn. All civilians take cover." Lara and I stared at each other in disbelief and the sky already hummed with the vibrations of the rattling death machines.

Now we heard long penetrating whistling sounds. Then a few milliseconds of silence. Then powerful explosions. My ears ached. Two dining room windows blew out right beside us and what used to be a three story apartment block next door was now just a flattened, burning ruin. "I'm getting out of here. I'm going to our apartment in the old town. It has such thick walls, I'll be safer over there." I ran to get my coat.

"Oh, my God. Must you go?" Lara was mortified.

"Yes. Absolutely. I must go." I was adamant.

"If you insist of going, you must wear thick rubber boots," Harald said. "All those live wires and broken glass are too dangerous." Lara got a pair out from the hall cupboard and gave them to me.

"Must you really go?" She held my arm.

"Yes. Thanks for everything, and I'll contact you as soon as possible." I hugged them both quickly. They didn't want to release me.

I ran into a scene of apocalyptic fury: jagged orange and blue flames stabbed the black sky, explosions pierced my eardrums, and

the air was saturated with the stench of melted rubber, putrid smoke, burnt flesh and fresh blood.

I kept my gaze riveted on the ground in order to avoid live wires, but there was no escape from the inferno. I had to step over many pitiful corpses whose faces were still contorted in agony. Those poor souls were all civilians. Some people were barely alive and tried to howl for help, I saw limbs scattered here and there, but I didn't have time to stop.

I rushed by the church of St. Nicholas, part of it was already rubble and I wondered if the Dance of Death mural survived. Again, God seemed to be helpless against Satan. People moaned and groaned continuously and I cringed.

My lungs hurt from smoke inhalation, I heaved and coughed. I finally reached our apartment, opened the door and ran down to the basement. Many others were here already and were stunned to see me. We huddled together and prayed for our lives. I had to get back to the estate, I always felt safer there.

Luckily, the Russian bombs were not powerful enough to penetrate past the top floor of our four-story block. After I spent two days in the basement, I attempted to leave Tallinn in the morning. I wondered if Lara and Harald were still alive.

Some buses still ran and I boarded one that headed out toward Kadri. As we left the old town I saw that many priceless historical buildings, including the magnificent Estonian Theater where Lara met Harald, were just smoldering ruins. What a great achievement! The bombs may have killed some Germans, but it was mainly civilians who were dead.

Did they bomb the estate? I wondered how my family were.

I finally arrived at our log home, Mother took me in her arms as soon as she saw me at the door. "You cannot imagine how Father and I have worried about you."

"They didn't bomb around here, did they?" I asked anxiously.

"No, but I could see Tallinn burning when I stood in the garden. There was a purplish orange devil's halo all over the city. We heard that the Finns in Helsinki could see the fiery glow across the gulf. How did you survive it?" She gazed into my eyes.

I told her about the escapade through the streets and asked her if she knew anything about Lara and Harald.

"We got a message today. They survived the bombing." I sighed with relief.

Father appeared and held my hands. "I wish the war were over already so that you could start living a normal life. I wish you could stay close to us and stop this adventuring around. Worrying about you is going to kill your mother and me." His reddish brown hair had silver streaks in it now and his noble and kind face was marked with the wrinkles of suffering and worry.

"I agree with you. Even after I marry Adam, I will never be too far away from the estate. I love this place more than anything in the world." I breathed in the pristine late afternoon air and relived some of the carefree moments of my childhood.

It was early June and my wedding day had arrived. I walked down the aisle of a small country church close to the estate. Lara had made a long, white silk and satin dress for me and embroidered it with hundreds of pearls. I carried a bouquet of pale pink roses and dark lilacs.

Twenty of my relatives were here, and so were Adam's parents and a few of his relatives. Adam waited for me in a tuxedo. Everyone stared at me and I heard muffled voices saying, "She looks more radiant than ever. She truly is one of the most beautiful young women around here. How lucky Adam is."

The ceremony was short. We kissed and turned around to walk back down the aisle. We were married. Was this really true? I smiled as I saw the tears in the faces of my family. How I loved them all!

A chauffeur drove us in a Mercedes toward my parents' home on the estate. All the walls of the home were decorated with suspended evergreen branches and lilacs. The food preparations went on for three days and the whole house was permeated by the aromas of blossoms and delicacies.

Adam and I sat down at a dining room table loaded with gourmet foods. Father lifted up a glass of vodka and said, "To the end of the war and to the beginning of a profoundly happy life for Sonya

and Adam." He downed the vodka in one gulp and then accidentally dropped the glass, it shattered. I gasped. Mother and Lara rushed to clean up the shards of glass.

Everyone cheered, "To Sonya and Adam." Albert played his accordion and everyone sang folk songs. Soon, couples got up to dance to the vivacious music and the living room shook with laughter and pounding feet.

Adam and I joined the dancers after a few minutes. I couldn't believe how far I had come since my precarious childhood days. No one knew if I would live or die and now I was married to the man of my dreams and was already a millionairess. All I needed now was for the war to end.

We left the reception after a couple of hours and the chauffeur drove us to Adam's house. As we pulled up the driveway, he told me, "We will live here in one wing of the house until the war ends. After that, we will see what we do."

He laughed and helped me out of the car toward the house. He lifted me easily and carried me over the threshold and I was glad he was so strong.

We dined with his parents later and I was treated like a princess by everyone.

Our upstairs bedroom was as luxurious as the ones at the seaside palace resort in Narva. The servants had embroidered my initials onto the silk pillowcases. I looked over a vase full of dark red roses and baby's breath into the garden and saw the gazebo by the river. This was all mine now.

"I'm sorry I have been so moody lately. I never know where the officers are going to send me next and I hate that. I don't like taking orders from anyone. Except you, of course." He wrapped his arms around me and gave me a passionate kiss. "I've waited so long for this day." He took off his jacket and started loosening his tie. Then he slowly unbuttoned the front of my dress.

"There will never by anyone else in my life," I whispered.

"And you will always be the most precious woman in my life," he said softly as he continued to undress me. His fingers worked with stealth

and precision, as if he were unwrapping a fragile gift. I rested my cheek on his chest and enjoyed his scent of lemon and lavender cologne.

When I was completely naked, he backed away a little to gaze at me. "You are absolutely perfect," he whispered.

I lay down on the powder-blue silk sheets and waited anxiously for him. He undressed in a few seconds and laid down beside me, I trembled a little. He kissed my neck and my breasts and I moaned with pleasure. I put my arms around him and drew him closer.

I woke up at three in the morning after an intense nightmare in which Adam and I were separated by an explosion. "Are you awake?" I nudged his arm.

"Yes," he mumbled.

"The Germans are losing the war, aren't they?"

"Yes." He was wide awake now.

"What are we going to do if the Soviets invade again? Where will we go? What will happen to our families?" This uncertainty gnawed at my soul.

"Don't worry. I have already made plans for us to flee to Sweden together." He sounded confident and reassuring, but I was still tortured by that nightmare.

Adam only had three days off before he had to report for duty again, so we jumped in the car and headed for the west coast. We stopped in charming country inns along the way and he promised me that we would have a real honeymoon after the war.

Right after we got back to the mansion in Kadri, he left for military duty and promised to visit as soon as he could. I spent a lot of time with my mother-in-law. She showed me stunning jewelry made of emeralds and rubies and asked me which pieces I would like to have for myself. She was very affectionate.

Adam visited occasionally and the servants always prepared a special feast when he came home. I was always heartbroken when he left, even though he continued to be moody. I knew the war affected him very much, it warped all of us.

It was the end of July, and Mother and I visited our Tallinn apartment for a few days. In spite of the devastation caused by the bomb-

ing, there was some *joie de vivre* and a sense of hope in the city. Our people were accustomed to rebuilding beautiful structures out of ashes.

One morning, Mother looked down from our second floor kitchen window. "Aunt Lara is walking across the street and is heading toward our block. She looks worried. I don't like that look. I know her so well."

"Maybe she's just not feeling well," I said.

"I think it's more than that," Mother said and frowned.

Aunt Lara came into our apartment, but did not speak. She took several deep breaths as she pulled a postcard out of her purse. Her eyes moistened as she read it to herself in what looked like disbelief.

I leaned over and glanced at the card. "It has Finnish stamps. What could be so terrible about a card from Finland?" I smiled. Slowly, she passed the card over to me and turned her head away.

I read it:

"To Aunt Lara:

Please tell everyone that I deserted and then fled to Finland. I have joined the Finnish military as a paratrooper. Maybe I will see you after the war.

Adam."

I read and reread the card. It was definitely in his handwriting and these really were Finnish stamps. This was not a joke. I dropped the card to the floor and shrieked.

Mother rushed over to me while Aunt Lara yelled, "He wasn't good enough for you anyway. He was too damn spoiled. And to think that he wrote us an open card after deserting. We may all be arrested because of him. Is this what we deserve?"

She took me in her arms and I buried my head in her bosom. I felt as if I had been sentenced to die in a medieval torture chamber. Perhaps on the rack? Perhaps in the Iron Virgin?

A few minutes later we heard military trucks arrive at the main entrance. Men gave sharp orders in German and heavy boots shook

the stairs that led up to our apartment. Aunt Lara tore up the card into tiny bits and flushed them down the toilet.

There was heavy pounding on the door now. One of the men hollered, "Military police. We have reason to believe that a deserter is hiding here. Open up immediately."

Mother opened the door and two officers in full uniform and three soldiers entered. One officer looked straight at me and said, "We know that the man who deserted is married to the young lady. We will search the apartment. I trust you understand what a severe offense it is to hide a deserter." He sneered at us.

Mother was not intimidated. She thrust out her chin and even sounded annoyed. In good German, she said, "Search all you want. You won't find anyone. And make sure you don't destroy any of my furniture." I was still in her arms and was too shocked to cry.

The soldiers began the search. They had greenish blue eyes and they looked like panthers in steel helmets. They jabbed mattresses and closets with bayonets, they looked out of all the windows and at the outside walls, I wanted to scream.

Mother held me tighter. I could smell her indomitable strength and I wished some of it could transfer over to me. I needed it desperately. How could Adam have done a thing like this? I probably would never see him again because the Nazis would execute him if he dared to come here again and if the Soviets returned they would send him to Siberia. What was I going to do with the rest of my life? Should I also have made plans to leave the country and wait for the war to finish? I couldn't face any of the places where I was so happy with him. Maybe I should have gone back to the estate and stayed there. I couldn't think anymore, I was withering inside.

After the police left, I ran to my bedroom and collapsed on the bed. I stayed there for two days and two nights without eating anything. My face was so swollen from crying that I did not dare to look at myself in the mirror.

Soon after we arrived back at the estate, Mother led me out to the garden. "When you think your soul is going to break into millions of pieces, start doing heavy manual labor and keep working

until your whole body aches. Eventually, your despair will ease. You'll see." She handed me some weeding tools and showed me all the work that needed to be done. I sighed, it would take days to weed the whole garden. Confidence and courage radiated from her and I hoped that I would feel like that again one day.

I knelt on the ground and pulled weeds from around the wooden music platform. Would Alex ever return to play duets with Albert? Would I ever feel like dancing again? My fingernails were black and my palms were greenish brown, but the fragrance of the dark, damp earth soothed my nostrils. Lilac branches brushed against my face and tickled me and beetles scurried away in all directions.

Something rough licked my leg, I turned around and saw our German shepherd. He whined and sat down with his front paws outstretched. Then he inched closer to me and kept whining. I patted his head and he seemed to sense my searing pain, he licked my hands. He deserved a reward.

I went to the kitchen, found some raw pork meat and took it out to him. He chewed a little, but swallowed most of the piece whole, then he put both paws around my left leg and nuzzled his cold, wet nose up to my skin. Why couldn't most humans be as loyal as he was? Animals were my true friends when I was little and they continued to love me unconditionally.

Father accompanied me on long walks through the forest, he was always very sympathetic and tried to console me by telling me that Adam did not deserve me and that he would have a terrible end one day. It comforted me to know that my family remained totally loyal. Father was happy that I lived on the estate again, but Adam's parents wanted me to go back and live with them and I didn't want to go.

Albert came home occasionally and played violin, accordion and table harp for me. He sang and told jokes and I smiled a little, but I was not ready to laugh and I certainly didn't feel like dancing.

In early August, Albert married a young woman called Erna, she was my age and had a cheerful personality. The wedding took place in a small country church and only a few family members attended.

The happiness I felt for my brother displaced some of my own despair.

I became friends with Erna and we spent hours talking in the garden about the future.

One windy afternoon Mother stepped out of the house and walked toward us in the garden. She looked very concerned and very determined. "Something is wrong. I know that look," I said to Erna. What was wrong?

She sat down beside us. "I hear too many reports about how Soviet soldiers round up young women and send them to Siberia and other places to work as sex slaves." Her voice was low and intense and Erna and I stared at each other in terror. "The Germans are retreating and the Soviets are rushing in with a vengeance. You two are in great danger because you are young and beautiful. You must leave the country as soon as possible and go and stay with your aunt and uncle in Poland." She looked at Erna and touched her hand. "Of course, when the war is over, you will come back home. We're bound to regain our independence. No one believes that the Allies will allow Stalin to swallow us up."

"Ugh! Can you imagine being raped to death?" Erna shook her head in fear and revulsion.

"I cannot imagine that." I shuddered. "Mother is right. We must leave."The hard work I did around the estate eased my grief enough so that I could make positive decisions about my future. I really wanted to go away for a while so that I could start a fresh, new life upon my return. An adventure in a new environment would help me clear my mind.

"Are you sure these are reliable reports?" I asked Mother.

"Absolutely. Ask your Father or Albert or any other responsible person. The German officer confirmed the reports before he left for duty a couple of days ago." She still looked very sure of herself and very determined.

Adam's parents, who had aged considerably, came over to our home one sunny afternoon. They were both despondent. "Please stay here. We love you, and Adam will always love you. He will

come back one day and everything will be as wonderful as it was before." His mother was tearful and his father winced with obvious pain and I felt sorry for both of them because Adam had hurt them as well.

"I love you too, but I am deeply disappointed with your son. What kind of husband would disappear and leave me at the mercy of the military police? He promised me on our wedding night that we would flee to Sweden together if necessary. If he really loved me, he would have kept his promise." I started shaking and my voice cracked. Then I shouted, "He would have kept his promise." His parents cringed, but I was so angry I couldn't help myself. It felt good to displace some of the grief with anger.

They reached out and held my arms. "Please stay. We love you so much." Even his father was tearful now. Why couldn't Adam be as responsible as his father?

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I frowned and walked away toward the forest.

Erna and I were to leave in the third week of August on a German supply ship that occasionally transported some civilians from Tallinn to Danzig.

On my last morning at the estate I sat on a bench by the music platform and contemplated the peace and beauty of the garden.

Albert appeared with his violin and played a fiery gypsy melody for me. There was so much energy, passion and hope in the music, it told me that I would return soon.

When he finished, he said, "Listen to classical music when you feel that there is no more hope. It will give you strength and courage even when no one else is around to help you. I will write to you and Erna, and we will all meet here in the garden soon. We will dance and sing the day you both return."

He looked so kind and sincere. How lucky I was to have a brother like this. "Yes, we will dance and sing." I held his hands firmly, they were so warm and strong.

Mother came out to the garden and gave me six large silver spoons that were engraved with the special insignia of Czar Nicholas II.

"Father received these as a token of appreciation for his loyal service as an officer. They are very valuable, so sell them only when you must." They were very heavy and beautifully engraved.

"There is something else I want to give you." She took me by the shoulders and looked straight into my eyes. "I will give you some of my psychic power. We will be connected through it, and I will sometimes appear in your dreams to warn you of danger. You will also have sudden premonitions that will help you make the right decisions in times of crisis." I could feel waves of a special energy inundating my body. "Also, you will have the power to curse those who are cruel to you and you will have revenge against them." I remembered the swollen legs of the thief. Could I really acquire some of Mother's unusual powers?

"Thank you," I whispered.

We walked back to the house in total silence. What happened between us was too profound for words. She saved my life before. Would she have the power to continue to save me?

When Father saw me, he walked out of the front door and headed toward the forest. I ran after him. Why didn't he say goodbye to me? I would be leaving for Tallinn in a few minutes. He did not stop walking and his stride became longer and faster and he did not look back when I called him. The only thing he said was, "I cannot say goodbye to you, Sonya."

He was soon far away and close to the forest and I was devastated.

I ran back to the house to complain to Mother. She soothed me with an unusually soft voice, "You are his favorite child and he just cannot bring himself to say goodbye. Don't be hurt. Feel sorry for him."

"Am I really his favorite child?"

"Oh, yes. Since the time you surprised everyone by surviving your double pneumonia. He was so glad to send the coffin back."

We hugged and promised to see each other soon.

Erna and I spent the last night with Aunt Lara and Lara in Tallinn, so as to be close to the harbor.

The next morning, the two Laras accompanied us to the dock beside the dark grey supply ship. My sister gave me an envelope and said, "In case you have to flee further south for a while, this has the name and address of a good friend of mine who lives on the Lake of Constance, or Boden See, as the Germans call it. Show her this note and she will help you." I tucked it into a secure compartment in my purse and thanked her.

Now she was tearful. "I am pregnant. I know you must leave for a while, but I really wish you could stay here with me. I need you now more than ever."

"Pregnant! How wonderful. Does Harald know?" I clasped her hands.

"Yes. I told him last night. But how I wish you could stay. Must you really go?" Her tears streamed down her face now.

"We must go, but don't worry. We'll be back soon. The thought of you and the rest of the family will give me the courage to face anything." I hugged her and smiled broadly at her to try to cheer her a little.

It was time for us to board. The heavy engines churned up the oily, greenish-brown harbor water so much that a seething white foam crept around the ship. The vibrations inundated my body as I walked up the stairs, the engines felt potent and determined. I was glad Erna and I had only one luggage each.

We walked up to the highest deck and looked down onto the platform. The two Laras waved at us and shouted, "Come back. We miss you already. Must you go?"

We waved back at them and I shouted, "We'll be back soon." They kept waving and blowing their noses into white handkerchiefs.

I gazed at the fairy tale skyline of my beloved old town. There was a festival of copper-green and black pointed church spires, rusty-red tile conical roofs on towers, lemon yellow buildings, cream and peach buildings, sandstone walls with battlements and dark evergreen trees. When I would return I would see our own flag flying from the Pikk Hermann tower, wouldn't I?

The boat pulled away from the dock with stealth and precision, and as we left the harbor, I could still see Aunt Lara and Lara waving at us from the dock, they seemed to be as tiny as insects now. I would come back as soon as possible and live on the estate. I smiled to myself.

Chapter Seven

As we approached German-occupied Danzig in the hazy afternoon, we were shocked to see only ash-grey stone buildings. The closer we got, the more gloomy and oppressive the atmosphere became.

We disembarked onto a rough concrete platform and stern, steely-eyed officials pointed us toward concrete stairs that led to the train station.

We rushed up the stairs, hoping to find a sign that said "Breslau." "There it is," Erna pointed to a sign suddenly. We were lucky we didn't have to walk far.

After showing our passports to the train ticketmaster, we climbed the steep stairs into the silvery grey, streamlined train. Soon after we secured our luggage in racks and sat down, the doors locked and the train accelerated quickly to a dizzying, nauseating speed and we stared at each other because we had never experienced anything like this before.

A ticketmaster noticed our expressions of shock and walked over to us, laughing softly. "This is a *schnellzug*. We'll be in Breslau very soon. Where are you from?"

"Tallinn. We came to Danzig on a supply ship," I told him.

He made a whistling sound and arched his eyebrows. "You're lucky to be alive. A supply ship was blown up by mines yesterday. There were very few survivors." Erna grasped my hand and we stared at each other open-mouthed.

We saw ordinary, flat farmlands with a few trees clumped beside the sparsely placed, modest farm houses and we wondered what awaited us in Breslau.

As the man predicted, we arrived soon and were directed to the police station next to the train station so that our refugee status could be recorded with the authorities.

After stamping our passports, the police told us how to get to Erna's aunt's house. I was grateful I had a solid foundation in German from my high school years.

We boarded a bus that rumbled on dirt roads through sugar beet fields and when we stopped, the driver told us that we had to walk through the fields for about two kilometers to get to the address we wanted.

As we walked on the dirt road, we noticed shabbily dressed, hollow-eyed Polish farm laborers who stopped their toils and leaned on their tools to stare at us in what looked like suppressed terror. "I wonder why they're staring at us like that," I said.

"They probably think we're spies," Erna said quietly.

The large, white wooden house was set close to picturesque hills whose giant oaks were already shedding leaves. Erna's relatives were kind and hospitable.

After spending one week at the house, we heard on the news that the Germans had completely retreated from the Baltic States, that the Soviets were in full control of Estonia again, and that they were continually advancing in their quest for more territorial spoils.

Erna and I were in shock, and the police informed us that we had to find jobs to earn the right to stay in Breslau. When would we be able to go home? How long would the Soviets stay in our country? Were our families safe?

Erna found a job as a cashier in a downtown hotel. The whole city consisted of drab grey stone buildings. There were no trees anywhere, and I didn't see colorful churches with tall spires. How I missed Tallinn!

I found a job in a pharmacy which was only three blocks away from Erna's hotel and moved in with the pharmacist's family above the store. I worked very hard, and the family appreciated me so much they shared their evening meals with me, which consisted mainly of cold cuts, cheese and bread.

We worked for a few months, hoping all the time that the war would end and that we would be able to return to a free country.

It was 1945, in the middle of a cruelly cold and white January, and all the residents of Breslau were ordered to evacuate the city because the Soviets were steadily approaching and were perilously close already. Elderly men and women and women with children were given reserved train seats so that they could quickly flee to Dresden. All other residents had to find their own means of transportation. I had to find Erna.

I ran over to her hotel one morning, leapt up the grey stairs, bounded through the dull wooden doors and stopped in front of the desk. "Where is Erna?" I was out of breath.

An apathetic clerk shrugged his shoulders and told me, "We have no idea. All we know is that she left yesterday."

"Left? Yesterday?" I was incredulous. He nodded. "Did she leave a message for Sonya? That's me."

"No. Nothing at all." I trembled as I realized that I was completely alone in a sulfurous, life-thirsty inferno. No matter how horrendous the situation sometimes was in Estonia, I was always close to my loving family and to that wonderful estate. But now? Now there was only frightful isolation and uncertainty. I cried out to Mother in my mind. Can you feel my pain? Can you help me? I hoped Erna would meet a terrible fate. How could she have done this to me? How?

I didn't even have time to think about anything except how to flee. I had to get out of here, even if I had to walk. The pharmacist's wife and children had already left and the man was nowhere to be found. *Think, for Christ's sake, think,* I thought. What about Erna's relatives? No. They were elderly, so they were probably already gone.

As I approached the pharmacy, the postman handed me a letter. The envelope had strange stamps and red and brown stains all over

it and it had the address of a field post on the upper left corner. I tore it open and found a note from Albert:

"I am in a forest almost completely surrounded by Russians. I miss you very much. Conditions are dismal. I will not be able to write to you anymore."

I sighed heavily and folded the letter many times so that it would fit into my wallet. Poor, poor Albert. What was going to happen to him? What would happen to me?

Suddenly I thought of a friendly policeman who sometimes came to the pharmacy. I called him and he answered the phone. Thank God. Maybe he could help. He said, "I must stay in town to the very end to expedite the evacuation, but, if you want, you can come with me and my wife in our little car. As long as you don't bring much luggage."

"Thank you. Thank you so much," I practically screamed into the telephone. I was so excited that the receiver shook.

It was an icy morning and I climbed into the back seat of the policeman's car. His wife was not as friendly as he was, but that didn't matter, I just hoped that the car wouldn't break down. We had to keep moving. We had to. I didn't come this far to end up being raped and killed by brutal soldiers and then thrown in a ditch.

We crawled along a road that led to one of the bridges that spanned the Oder River. I felt sick as I looked out of the windows at a frozen, macabre wasteland strewn with dead and dying horses and exhausted, disoriented people desperately trying to walk to the bridge. Many of them carried their belongings in bulging rucksacks and valises and some slipped and fell on the ice and didn't have the strength to get up. Some were already on their knees, screaming hysterically, and others were moaning in unbearable grief and fear. A few people stretched their arms out to our car, hoping that we could take them with us, and I remembered the poor souls in Kadri who wanted to come with us in our carriage to the estate. Why so much suffering for innocent people? Why? Why?

We reached the bridge and stiff military guards scrutinized everyone. They talked to the policeman and allowed us to start crossing over the wide river, but after we drove about three meters, we heard the jarring word, "Halt!" Oh, no! Wouldn't they let us continue?

"We are the last ones allowed to cross the bridge," the policeman said in a hoarse voice. I turned around sharply and looked out of the rear window. I saw the terrified faces of the civilians who were denied access to the bridge. It seemed that I was the last civilian to leave. Could this be possible? What was going to happen to those poor souls?

We reached the opposite bank of the river and guards told us to plug our ears because the bridge was to be blown up in an attempt to foil the Russian advance into German-held territory. The explosion was very powerful and seemed to send needles through my eardrums. Huge amounts of debris and dust hovered in the air and the river shuddered as the debris dropped into it.

We drove west through ordinary, flat countryside sprinkled with a few farmhouses and trees.

After a couple of hours, we stopped at a fuel station to fill up the tank and later on we stopped at farms to buy food.

In the evening, we stopped at the house of the policeman's cousin and stayed for the night. We were fed well and I was very grateful.

Early in the morning we headed out toward Görlitz and the policeman told me that he and his wife would drop me off at the train station there because they were sure that Red Cross workers would take care of me. I was relieved, but also very anxious because I would soon be totally alone among strangers. Would they really help?

I got out of the car at the Görlitz station and thanked the policeman for saving my life. He told me that he was glad he could be of service and pointed to the highly organized Red Cross workers who were guiding other refugees into train compartments.

He then got back into his car and sped away toward Magdeburg. I stood closer to the tracks with my luggage and looked wistfully at the smoke emanating from his exhaust pipe. Would I ever see him again? Probably not.

Now a matronly Red Cross worker hurried toward me with outstretched arms and a fresh smile. "You look exhausted," she told me as she held my arms.

"I am." I smiled at her wanly, but I knew she would help me because she looked energetic, efficient and kind. I began to suppress my fear of isolation.

She guided me into the train, helped me with my luggage, and said, "This train is going to Dresden. You will get out there and other Red Cross personnel will take care of you. Don't worry."

"Thank you. Your kindness warms my heart." She laughed softly. I sat down on a hard wooden bench, leaned back, sighed, and then slid my luggage under my seat. No matter what would happen next, at least I was continuing to head west and there were resourceful people helping refugees like me.

This was one of those really slow trains that stopped in every hamlet and waited for a long time, so I lay down on the bench and only looked up once in a while to see if there was any unusual scenery. Another refugee sat on the bench across from me and was fast asleep, her head was resting on her chest. My legs were swollen and all my joints ached.

After many hours, we approached Dresden. The countryside was very picturesque. There were rolling hills, parks, many trees, brightly colored buildings and striking churches and I didn't feel that I was in a strange land anymore because I saw architecture that reminded me of Tallinn. How much more beautiful this would all have looked without that accursed snow.

We arrived in Dresden in the dark and my feet were so swollen I could hardly move. My shoes were useless. Now what?

Nurses came into the train and examined my feet and two of them helped me down the steps and another one magically appeared with a pair of chocolate brown leather boots. They fit and were very comfortable and I was so grateful I wished I could have given them something in return.

Even at night, under dim lights, I could see enough of the majestic Gothic cathedrals to feel a tremendous surge of hope. Many other buildings seemed to be alive and looked like frozen Baroque music.

I was guided into a train that would take me to nearby Chemnitz. It was supposed to be safer for civilians than Dresden because it was a much smaller city.

I spent the night on the train and woke up just before we reached Chemnitz, the lovely rolling hills and bright country inns cheered me.

At the Red Cross building, I was assigned to live with an older lady whose daughter was in Berlin. She was apparently very lonely and looked forward to sharing her house with a young woman.

It was February, and the landlady continued to be very kind. She bought good food from nearby farms for us, we enjoyed walking to quaint coffee houses in the hills and we spent hours talking about the future.

We heard about the bombing of Berlin on the radio, and she was terribly worried about her daughter because she did not write or call.

I worried about myself because I was sure that the bombing would spread to the Dresden area and I also heard about the massacre of civilians who were left behind in Breslau. To think that I was the last one to leave! I knew I would never forget those looks of terror on the frozen, macabre wasteland. I had to go further south. I had to. It would be safer there. I listened to a lot of classical music and tried to muster more courage as I thought of Albert's parting words to me. I wondered where he was now, I wondered how everyone was. I had to communicate with my beloved family soon.

The Allies indeed began to bomb Dresden and Chemnitz was close enough to the city to be in grave danger, so we spent every evening from six to midnight in dark, deep hillside mineshafts with other civilians. We would arrive just before six so that we could find a place to sit. The air reeked of musty chemicals and the rocky walls were slippery with beads of moisture, I feared that I would contract tuberculosis.

There were mainly women and children in the mineshafts and the children screamed hysterically as soon as the humming of the pregnant bomb-laden planes began. None of the mothers could console their children.

As the planes got closer the rocks vibrated, sending waves to each other and creating a demonic, torturous echo chamber from which there was no escape. I feared I would go mad.

I looked at one little blond girl whose eyes and nose exuded streams of clear and yellow ribbons; her face was red and swollen and she gasped for air and she reminded me of how I was years ago when Mother saved my life.

The penetrating wail of the planes was unbearable, everyone shrieked. "Mother, help me. Can you hear the cries of my soul through these rocks? Now I see the gypsy who told me I would never return to my home. Go away! I hate you. I will go back home soon. Mother! Don't let me die here," I muttered to myself.

After a couple of weeks of enduring the bombing torture, I listened to a sublime Haydn symphony on the radio and thought of Albert and Mother. I could feel their presence and it infused me with courage. Yes, I would leave Chemnitz and go to Friedrichshafen on Lake Constance and Lara's friend would help me. The Soviets probably wouldn't get that far, and the Allies would have no reason to bomb that area.

My landlady didn't want me to leave, but I knew this was the right thing to do because Mother appeared in my dreams and told me so.

One frosty, sunny morning I took a bus to the train station at the southern end of Chemnitz. There was less snow now and I was relieved to see that the little city was not bombed.

I walked up to the wicket to buy a ticket, but a greying man in a light blue uniform looked at me with resignation. He shook his head slowly and stroked his goatee. This didn't look good. "I would like to buy a ticket to Boden See," I said.

"I'm sorry, Fräulein. No civilian trains pass through here anymore." A current of shock jolted my body.

I raised my voice. "But I want to leave this area. I don't want to die in a bombing raid! There must be a way to get out of here."

He shrugged his shoulders. "You can try your luck with a military train. There is no guarantee that anyone will take you, though, and I have no idea when the next train will arrive."

"Thank you so much." I smiled wryly and walked away toward the tracks. There was no place to sit, so I sat on my sturdy luggage. I had to get out of here and I tried to connect with Mother's spirit.

After about an hour, a military train pulled into the station and stopped right in front of me. I studied the train windows like a bird of prey looking for a sign of life. An officer soon lifted the window and leaned out toward me. "What are you waiting for, Fräulein?"

I stood up quickly and in my best Hoch Deutsch, I said, "I want to get to Boden See as soon as possible. Are you heading south? Can you take me with you?"

"Kommen Sie hier, Fräulein. Schnell! Schnell!" The officer beckoned to me energetically with his arm and I rushed to the window.

He reached down and pulled up my luggage immediately, it vanished into the compartment. Another officer appeared and helped the first one pull me up. *"Schnell! Schnell!"* In only a few seconds I was through the window and standing on the floor of the compartment.

There were two other officers here, and they produced a military coat and hat. "Put these on, put your hair up under the hat, sit down and keep your head turned toward the window," one of them said in a low soft voice.

I did everything in a few seconds. I sat down and faced the window immediately to my left, but I moved my eyeballs to the right, guards were walking up and down the halls and looking through the glass of the compartment door. I hoped they would just keep walking.

"Don't worry. We are all officers and those stupid guards don't bother us much. Besides, there are plenty of female staff who move from one compartment to another. Just act confident if anyone dares to question you."

I smiled at the window as the train started moving and accelerating. I thought I could relax just a little.

Then one of them said, "We don't know how far south we're going to get because the tracks have been bombed in many places."

I gasped. "Really?" My voice faltered.

"We may get as far as Ulm if we're lucky."

I closed my eyes and prayed to all the deities who had ever existed. *Please let us get to Ulm.* I could do nothing but pray, so I didn't notice much of the scenery.

My prayers were answered after many, many hours, and we pulled into the Ulm station. It was night, but there was bright moonlight. There was a lot of commotion in the train now, and the officers told me to disembark in my regular clothes. I thanked them profusely and walked off the train without being noticed by any guards.

I walked into the station to think about what I would do next and saw some loquacious and swarthy young men speaking languages I did not know. They gesticulated with their hands a lot. Who were they?

It turned out that they were Armenian students from Berlin, they also just got off the military train and wanted to catch another train to get to Boden See so that they could cross over to Switzerland and go home. They offered to take me to the other station.

We walked out of the station and toward a bridge that spanned the Danube River. The little bit of the city that I could see looked enchanting. There were thick medieval walls, some buildings with crenellated roofs, some towers with pyramidal roofs, and Gothic cathedrals. The students told me that quite a bit of Ulm had already been bombed, and that frightened me very much.

As we crossed the bridge, I looked down at the famous river and was very disappointed. "Does the river really have this muddy ochre color or are my eyes fooling me because of the darkness?"

"It really is like that most of the time," one of the students said as he carried my luggage. "I have already called an old farmer friend of ours to meet us at the bridge with his carriage. He will take us to the next station."

Soon we heard the pleasant clip-clop of horses and the rumbling of heavy wooden wheels on a stone street. He was coming, and I felt so lucky to have met these students.

The farmer appeared with a huge wagon and the seven students and I climbed up into it, everyone continued to be very polite.

We arrived at the other station after about an hour and climbed into the train that would hopefully take us to Boden See. We were all lucky to have made such a good connection purely by coincidence, but I sat down and prayed that we would get to the lake without any mishaps.

It was a crisp, beautiful morning in early March when I arrived in Friedrichshafen, which was a small city nestled on the edge of an azure lake and flanked by warm green hills that were full of cherry and apple trees. There were rose bushes everywhere and I could imagine how stunning the place would look when the weather got warmer and the flowers bloomed. The homes were all like multicolored pastel doll houses. There was a striking late Gothic church close to the lake and I could see the Swiss alps behind it. I had never seen such high mountains before and they looked supernatural.

But I had no time to explore. I was hungry and exhausted and wanted to find Lara's friend before reporting to the authorities. Would she be there? Did she still live here? What would I do if she was not here anymore? Would the authorities transfer me to some awful displaced persons' camp?

A friendly policeman gave me the directions to Lara's friend's house and I found the place easily.

I walked up to a neat and bright little house with a manicured garden. "Mother, please let her answer the door. Please," I whispered to myself.

After I knocked, a lady about Lara's age opened the door just a little, half her face was covered by shadows and she peered out at me with apprehension. I quickly introduced myself before she could close the door and her expression melted into a smile as soon as she heard Lara's name. I sighed and smiled.

She asked me to come in and invited me to stay with her for as long as it would take to establish myself in town.

As I sat down on a soft leather couch I wondered if I would really be able to stop running away from catastrophes for a while, I badly needed rest and a little peace of mind. I silently thanked Mother and Lara and hoped that they could hear me.

The next day I registered at the police station as a displaced person and they told me I could stay in the area if I would find a job, so I told them about my pharmacy background and they directed me to the pharmacy in the town of Weingarten, which was only a few kilometers north of the lake.

I took the tram to Weingarten and walked across the street to the pharmacy, where a jovial, middle-aged pharmacist hired me right away and told me that I could start working immediately. This was totally unexpected. I couldn't remember the last time I felt so wonderful. I hoped to wait out the duration of this horrific war here and then go back home to Estonia. Stalin would have retreated by then and we would have regained our independence. I would run through our wheat fields, pick wildflowers and wild strawberries again, go dancing at the castles during the white nights when the sun hardly sets, dance when Albert and Alex played vivacious violin duets and play with the animals. Who knows? Maybe Adam would reappear. His parents told me he would always love me. Even if he wouldn't, I would always have my beloved family and that enchanted estate.

After I spent a few enjoyable and hopeful weeks in Boden See, my landlady showed signs of a grave illness, she had heavy bleedings that were caused by cancerous tumors and there was no hope for recovery. I was obliged to find another place to live.

I moved to Weingarten to be closer to work, and, a few days after that, I found out that Lara's friend was dead. I felt terribly sorry for her, but just as sorry for myself. I was alone again in a strange paradise and all the beauty in the world could not console me because I was living in forced exile.

In the first week of May, 1945 Germany surrendered to the Allies and the Boden See area came under French jurisdiction and the Munich area was controlled by the Americans. I couldn't believe how much territory Stalin now controlled.

Some of the results of the February 4–11 Yalta Conference were printed in the newspapers. Stalin was allowed to keep too much of the territory he invaded, the Baltics were free before the war, and because of Hitler's treachery they would now stay in the Soviet

Union. The war-weary world was not going to challenge Stalin anymore, so he really showed his true colors with great arrogance now and it was too late to do anything about it.

Churchill spoke of the "Iron Curtain" and how it slammed down onto the world stage, that meant that there was no more hope for me to return home. I was incredulous. If I would have attempted to return, I would definitely have been arrested and shot at the border or sent to Siberia. Worse yet, my family would have been in mortal danger. Were they still alive? The KGB and NKVD spy networks kept files of everyone with deadly accuracy and they would have known the minute they saw me that I fled in August, 1944 to escape them.

Ordinary citizens of the Soviet Union were not allowed to travel beyond the confines of the Union and no communication was possible between them and the rest of the world. It was now officially impossible for me to even attempt to write home. "What kind of monsters run this world?" I muttered to myself as I dropped the paper onto the floor of my room.

I ran down to the lake and stumbled onto the path along the shore. The brilliant sunshine illuminated the ubiquitous pastel blossoms and propelled their delicate, warm fragrance over to me, but I felt no joy. I felt sick because this beauty seemed to mock me and tell me, "This world can be a gorgeous and happy place, but not for you, Sonya, not for you." I looked at the majestic Gothic church and shook my fist at it. How could you let evil win again? How could you? This world doesn't make sense at all. *How can I believe in an omnipotent and benevolent God now? I'm sorry. I don't. Satan has more power,* I thought.

I sat down on a bench and watched the elegant sailboats cut through the ink-blue waves. The war ended for those people out there, but it was not over for me. I feared I would have to endure the longest war in history—the one that would never end.

One young couple was walking with their little boy beside the lake, they were laughing and holding hands. I turned my head away. If I had to be a refugee in exile, why couldn't I be with my family?

Even refugees usually flee and start a new life together. But here I was, a woman totally alone and facing a hostile world. What had I done to deserve this?

After I returned to my room I looked at the small family album I brought from home. It was small because I was so sure I would return soon. Now I was sorry I didn't bring more pictures because these photos would probably be the only things I would ever have to remind me of my wonderful family and the estate. This was impossible.

I stared at my favorite picture, Mother wore a long dress and sat in a chair and Father, dressed like a country gentleman, stood attentively next to her. They both seemed to look at me wistfully.

After I closed the album I was overcome by convulsions and violent sobs. I could hardly breathe, I fell to the floor and stayed there for at least an hour. Rivers of tears spread out all around me.

When a little strength returned, I crawled over to my bed so that I could cry all night. Would I survive this ordeal?

Chapter Eight

At least summer arrived and I could walk along the many country roads and pick all the plump, wine-dark cherries and golden apples I could eat. The roadside trees belonged to the city, and the fruit could be picked on a first come first serve basis. I spent a lot of time picking and eating. Nature once again helped to soothe my frayed nerves.

The whole area teemed with roses of all kinds. Some of the candy pink bushes were almost twice my height and the mixed perfume of all the different types of red, pink, yellow, cream, coral and mauve blossoms transported me to a sweet land of hope. I was not totally impervious to the stunning beauty around me anymore, time helped to thaw some of the frost in my spirit.

I remembered Mother's advice about working until your whole body would ache when you thought your soul was going to break into millions of pieces. It helped me when Adam deserted and it helped me now. I worked long hours at the drugstore and volunteered for many hours of overtime. I even ground powders with mortar and pestle to fill prescriptions written by a veterinarian for some of the horses living on hillside farms and the chief pharmacist was kind and patient and taught me some new techniques.

It was a brilliant hot day in July and I was rolling suppositories into cones in the workroom when I heard the front door bells jingle more than usual, I also thought I heard a familiar laugh. I knew that laugh, it could shake the dead. Who was that woman out there?

The pharmacist walked into the workroom and chuckled. "A young woman just came in and asked if there is an Estonian woman working here. You better come out and meet her."

I secured my cones so that they wouldn't roll off the counter, walked to the front room and stopped short. I couldn't believe my high school pal Hilde was standing before me. No wonder I recognized that laugh. "Hilde! This is amazing. How did you get here?"

"By going through hell." She grinned and showed a full set of perfect, gleaming teeth. She still had those vibrant eyes, that straw blonde hair and that irrepressible spirit. "I lived through the Dresden bombing and then decided to get the hell out of there by hitchhiking. If things get worse, I can always flirt with some boatman and get him to smuggle me into Switzerland." We both exploded with laughter and hugged so hard we nearly fell over.

The pharmacist smiled at me. "Why don't you take the rest of the day off?"

"Oh, thank you. Thank you so much." Hilde and I rushed out and walked down toward the lake.

She eventually told me that she fled Estonia in order to avoid being used as a sex slave by the Soviet soldiers. She also knew that many of our high school friends did the same thing, but she had no idea where they were now.

She gave me the names and addresses of other Estonian refugees living in the area and I was very grateful because these new contacts could prove to be very useful. In any case, I looked forward to speaking my own language again and finding out about how my countrymen were surviving.

We sat down on a bench beside the lake and admired the view. She nudged my arm and said, "I often go to French military balls and meet bloody handsome Moroccan officers. They do sword dances. Do you want to come with me one evening?" Her turquoise eyes sparkled and she was breathless with excitement.

"Maybe," I said without much conviction as I gazed at the shimmering water. I was in no mood for flirting with anyone, but I found her vivacious spirit infectious and uplifting. She amazed me. Who

else could have laughed and flirted so soon after Dresden? And to think that she was right in the city itself and not in the outskirts, like me.

It was a warm morning in early September and I was helping a customer at the front counter by explaining how to use her skin rash prescription when Hilde burst in and startled us. She was breathless, did not smile, and looked terribly worried.

When my customer left, Hilde ran up to the counter to hold my hands. "Sonya, please help me." She was tearful and spoke with a weak, cracked voice.

"Of course," I said softly. What could possibly have been worse than Dresden? I looked at her with great empathy.

"I had an affair with a bloody handsome Moroccan officer. I think I am one week pregnant." She tried to stifle a sob.

"Oh, no! Are you sure?" I was worried now.

"He proposed marriage and then vanished. What am I going to do? I can barely look after myself. How can I look after a child?" Her grip on my hands tightened and her tears spilled down to her blouse. "Please help me," she whispered.

This was the first time I saw her in a desperate state. I knew how to safely terminate an early pregnancy with the right drugs, but I could also have lost my job by doing something highly illegal. What was I going to tell her?

I stared at her for a while without speaking. "I could lose my job by giving you those kinds of drugs," I finally told her. "You must understand my situation also." I tried to be as gentle as possible.

"Please help me. Please!" She looked so pitiful that I had to do something. But what? I was so happy she burst into my life again, but I couldn't afford to jeopardize my job. I would ask for advice from the chief pharmacist.

I went into the back room and whispered to him while Hilde sobbed out front. He understood. "Poor girl. No doctor would dirty his hands with her. I'll see what I can do. One week only, you say?" I nodded. He studied the shelves and picked up a dark green bottle with a wide cork. "Tell her to take a very hot bath after drinking two

heaping soupspoons of this powder with one glass of water. She better not tell a living soul about this."

"Thank you. She'll be so grateful she wouldn't dare talk." I transferred some powder into a smaller bottle and took it to her.

Her expression brightened when she saw the bottle and I smiled at her and related what the pharmacist told me. She clasped by hand and grinned. "I'm going back to my room right now to try it out. I'll never forget this. I can't thank you enough."

"Thank me when and if it works," I said.

"Oh, it will. I have faith in you." She bounded out of the store and as she vanished I wondered what was going to happen next. I hoped I wouldn't have to face dilemmas like that too often.

A couple of weeks later Hilde informed me that the powder worked and that she was no longer pregnant. We were both enormously relieved.

My landlady had three young children and was very anxious because her husband was in France and she did not hear from him for several months. "I'm going to visit a man who is supposed to be a very gifted clairvoyant. Maybe he will know something," she told me as she fidgeted with the cutlery on the kitchen table.

"Does he live here in town?" I asked her.

"Oh, yes. He was rejected by the military because he is not physically coordinated enough to pass the exam and he is too sensitive, but he has incredible psychic powers." The youngest child got up from the floor and jumped into her lap.

A few days later, the landlady returned from her visit to the psychic. He told her that her husband had been killed in action and was buried in Lyons.

Three days after the visit to the psychic, she received official military notification of her husband's death and burial in Lyons. I decided to visit this unusual man.

One cool, sunny morning in November I walked to the clairvoyant's house, which was small, charming and smothered with lots of climbing vines. There were little painted wooden figurines of Grimm fairy tale characters placed around a dark chocolate brown wishing well in

the front garden. Should I have thrown a coin in the well? I would have needed too many coins to make all the wishes I had.

As I walked up the three steps I admired the artistic glazed ceramic flower pots on either side of the front door. I knocked and waited. What if he would tell me some horrible news about my family? What if my own future was totally doomed? Maybe I shouldn't have come here.

A tall, thin middle-aged man in casual clothes opened the door. "You must by Sonya." He had a soft voice and shook my hand warmly. "Please come in." He had penetrating, greenish eyes and thinning, brown hair.

He led me to his office, which was to the right of the front door. There were several dark Persian rugs in the hall, living room and office.

"Sit down," he told me as he pointed to a chair and walked behind his oak desk. On the wall behind him was a gigantic political map of the world. There were bookcases lining one whole wall opposite the window, but I didn't see any packs of cards or crystal balls anywhere.

I sat down in the comfortable oak chair and looked at him. "Please close your eyes and be silent until I tell you to open them." I closed my eyes immediately. He did not speak or make any other sounds.

After what seemed to be 10 minutes, he told me to open my eyes. He stood up and pointed to the Baltic region of Europe. "You come from around here. You will not stay in Boden See for long and eventually you will go far, far west." He pointed toward North America. "You will work in a place where everyone wears a white coat and two of the young men there will want to marry you. You marry the man with thinner hair, but you will suffer very much because of this. There is another woman who will cause terrible trouble in your married life.

"You will have one or two children, I'm not sure which, but one child will be very loyal to you and will bring you happiness.

"When you are much older, you will visit your homeland and you will meet an old woman who will tell you stunning stories about the past."

Why would I want to go far west? I didn't want to leave Europe. "That is everything you have to tell me?"

He nodded. I paid him and he led me to the front door. "Good luck, have courage, and stay strong," he said. He stared at me as if he were trying to transfer some power over to me. He reminded me of Mother the day I left home and I suddenly felt a new wave of positive energy sweeping through my body. Now I was happy I came to his house.

The landlady who first visited the psychic moved to the Black Forest region to be closer to her family, so I moved into another house. The new landlady's son was a medical doctor who was attracted to me and began to take me out regularly. Soon, however, the landlady put an end to our relationship by telling her son that he could not marry a foreign refugee.

I was not heartbroken, but I was very disappointed to see how much power this mother had over her son and to feel the stigma of being a refugee here. I worked very hard at the pharmacy and my German was good. I grew up on an estate and married a millionaire, but I had no proof of this and I seethed with anger. I would have liked to see how well this prejudiced landlady would have fared in Estonia all by herself. Who did she think she was? This rejection made me very restless. The nature was gorgeous here, but the people were too provincial.

Hilde was not here anymore and I had no idea where she was. Would I ever see her again? I looked up the addresses of the Estonian refugees she gave me, hoping to get some tips from them as to where to go next to meet more interesting people and find more career opportunities.

The three Estonian men I met all wanted to move to Munich to study at universities. That city sounded very exciting and enticing and I wanted to try to study pharmacy there and maybe even get a degree. I would not have been able to do that in Friedrichshafen because there were no major universities in the area.

They told me that I had to obtain a special permission to move from one zone of occupation to another and they gave me the address of an Estonian lady student in Munich who was an expert on helping fellow refugees get established.

I was so relieved to talk with these men because I felt that there was some sort of a future for me and this helped to distract my mind from my excruciating pain. I cried every night after I looked at my slim family album no matter how successful some of my days seemed to be. The nights were interminably agonizing because I would relive happy times from my earlier youth and call out desperately to my family.

The French authorities gave me the permission to visit American-controlled Munich and I obtained a leave of absence from my boss at the pharmacy because I didn't want to slam the door behind me in case Munich turned sour.

It was January, 1946. I was very excited about boarding the train for Munich in the morning, even though the cold was penetrating and there was some snow on the ground.

Soon after we left the station in Weingarten, the ascent began into a magical realm of huge, imposing dark evergreens and steep, misty mountains. I had never expected such a high altitude, it was exhilarating and also frightening. Would the train fall off the cliff? Sometimes I hated to look out of the window, but it was all so breathtaking.

We climbed steadily and higher mountain ranges appeared and looked like crouching giants. The higher we climbed, the more I felt that I was in the company of Norse deities.

We finally broke through the clouds and entered a world of brilliant sunlight and turquoise skies. I stared at an iridescent, jagged peak in the far distance and thought that Valhalla must have been up there somewhere in the Alps.

Munich was large and impressive, but I didn't have time to really observe or explore now and I asked a policeman to direct me to the address of the Estonian lady student.

Luckily, I only needed one tram and it took me to a stop just across the street. I waded through heavy traffic and walked up to the front door of a four floor, beige stone apartment block with a

rusty-red tile roof. Many buildings in this area looked similar. I prayed that the student would be home.

A petite young lady with chestnut brown hair opened the door and as soon as she heard who I was, she smiled. "Please come in. I've been expecting you." We walked into a comfortably furnished hallway and then she led me up a steep set of creaky stairs and we entered her room. It was large and comfortable, and we sat down on a small couch. "You can stay with me for a few days while you explore the possibilities at the universities. I can offer you some food in the evening if you are very short of money." She sounded sincere.

"Thank you, I have some money, but I would enjoy your company when you get back from your classes." I was excited because this all looked very promising.

I spent the night on the small couch, but I didn't mind because I was right next to a wood burning stove and I was delighted to speak with a friendly compatriot. I was also anxious to get on with my new day in the morning.

Right after breakfast the German landlady came into the room and informed me that she did not allow subletting or room sharing. The student meant well, but she obviously could not override the landlady. I had to look for another place to stay for the night and I didn't have the money to stay in a hotel and it was the coldest month of the year. Where was I supposed to go now? I sighed heavily.

The student told me to come back to her room for meals and I promised to do that.

I walked along Leopoldstrasse, a wide boulevard graced by stately mansions. Some of them were intact, some were only partly bombed and others were pure rubble. I shuddered as I walked by the ghoulish and grotesque landscape, but I was determined to find shelter. I had to stay in the city for a few days to get the information I needed.

Some of the mansions looked passable from the front, but many had gaping holes in the side walls. They looked obscene, like animals that had been shot and left to die in the cold.

One villa seemed to be intact even though the windows were boarded up, so I walked up to the front door and turned the handle.

There was no resistance, I walked into the hall and started to explore. All the rooms were locked, but one door opened into a room with a wood burning stove and a camp bed made up with an army blanket. There was a large pile of newspapers next to the stove on the floor and a match box rested on the small end table next to the bed. This would have to do. I would come back here this evening after I gathered information at the universities and I hoped no one else would come here in the meantime.

The UNRRA University was organized by the Americans and the UN to give relief to refugee students and was situated in what used to be a gigantic complex of museum buildings. A policeman told me I had to take three trams to get there and I hoped I wouldn't get lost.

When I was on the third tram I thought I would suffocate because there were so many people squeezed up against me and I feared my coat buttons would be ripped off.

I struggled to get off at a stop that was right beside a wide bridge that crossed the Isar River. I hoped this was the right stop. I was grateful to be out in the stimulating, fresh air and I could look around and admire the palatial buildings along the river. There was a sign pointing to the UNRRA University across the bridge.

The bridge was decorated with graceful classical statues and I marveled at the tall, pointed church spires and domed buildings that guarded the river like sentinels. The view all along the river was magnificent and there were many more bridges in the far distance.

The university itself was a sprawling collection of office buildings, some of them had five floors, others had four and a few had three. There were many trees around the campus, which looked like a wonderful place to study. I hoped I would be accepted here.

Once I arrived at the reception desk in the administration building a stocky blond man with a sly and humorous expression greeted me with a warm handshake. He didn't look German or American. Who was he?

When I told him I was from Estonia, he laughed heartily and said, "Welcome! I am a graduate of Tartu University Law School."

This was a very good omen. I was sure I would get all the information I needed from him.

He told me refugees were not allowed to live in Munich unless they were enrolled in a university and passed all their courses and advised me to apply to the Engineering School as well as to the UNRRA University so that my chances of staying in Munich would be greater. Apparently, I could switch from one university to another once I was accepted in the system.

After I gathered all the necessary papers from the two universities I headed back to the Estonian lady student's room for supper and then to the bombed mansion for the night.

I laid under the thin army blanket on the little camp bed with my coat and boots still on. It was almost as cold in here as it was outside and my breath crystallized into eerie apparition-like patterns above me. The little black iron stove made crackling sounds in a futile attempt to warm up the room, but all it did was make me think of Father's huge fireplace at the estate and how much I missed everyone.

My sleep was fitful and I woke up frequently with panic attacks because anyone could have walked in here at any time. What would I have done if a criminal had snuck in?

I returned to Weingarten to study for the entrance exams and my Estonian friends tutored me in math so that I would be ready for anything.

In March I went back to Munich and passed the rigorous entrance exams for acceptance into the Engineering School.

It was a lovely morning in June of 1946, and I stood in a long general registration line for foreign students who were waiting to enroll in academic institutions and hoping to find lodgings. Classes were held even in the summer because many local men were anxious to return to civilian life and obtain good jobs.

I rearranged my personal papers and looked up for a second. That honey blonde hair looked so familiar. In the line next to mine stood a striking, tall young woman with Greta's face. This must have been a mirage, my homesickness was playing tricks on me.

"Sonya! Is it really you?" She arched her eyebrows and gasped.

"Greta! I can't believe this." We embraced for a long time and then we stepped back to look at each other in disbelief.

"I fled the country with my mother. She's living in one of the D.P. camps in the outskirts of the city. Do you have any of your family with you?" She looked energetic and as irrepressible as ever.

"No." I looked down on the ground for a few seconds. "I fled with my brother's wife and she soon vanished. I have been totally alone since January of 1945." How I envied Greta! If Mother would have been with me my life would have been a hundred times better.

Greta put her arm around me. "You won't be alone from now on. You will have me, and do you know that there are 58 other Estonian students here already? We meet every day for meals in the UN Relief Agency's restaurant on the campus. We'll be 60 now that you are here. Isn't that exciting? Meet us there at noon. We have our very own long table." She grinned and waved as she approached the end of her own line.

"Thanks! I'll see you there." I waved back and smiled. She still loved to arrange events the way she did when she asked me to the fateful dance where I met Adam. Munich seemed to welcome me in so many ways. Everything felt so much more hopeful now.

As I joined the other students at the relief restaurant, Greta jumped up from the table, ran over to me and introduced me to everyone while brimming with enthusiasm.

Mart, the student who first gave me the information at the reception desk, stood up and introduced me to his friend. "This is Lennart. He is a fellow graduate from Tartu." Lennart stood up and shook my hand. He had the same sly and humorous expression as Mart and he also reminded me of Evald.

"We can fix any problem. If you have trouble with anything, come to us." Lennart's eyes sparkled mischievously.

"I'll remember that," I laughed. These were the kind of people I liked to meet.

I spent two hours in the early afternoon standing in another line and waiting to speak with clerks who were supposed to help me find another room.

I finally arrived at the "end station", which consisted of two short, thin older men sitting on wobbly chairs around a flimsy table and playing chess. They were totally oblivious of my presence. I hummed, I tapped my foot, they did not respond. They just stared at the chess pieces, so I took a notebook out of my purse and started drawing caricatures of them.

Eventually, one of them looked up at me and gave me a piece of paper with an address. "This should be suitable for you," he mumbled and returned to his game immediately.

I grabbed the paper, left the office, found the right tram and arrived at the address. It was useless because the couple who answered the door told me they had no extra private room and that I was welcome to sleep on their living room couch. How could I have studied under these circumstances?

I stormed back to the university lodging office, stood right in front of the two chess players with my arms on my hips and tapped my foot on the floor. They did not react.

Suddenly Mother's spirit seemed to merge with my own and I pounded on the chessboard with my fist so that the pieces jumped and jiggled. "Listen here, you two clowns. You gave me a useless address. Useless! I went through a city I don't know on a tram leading nowhere for nothing. You better give me a list of really good addresses right now or I will harm both of you very badly. I'll be damned if I'm going to spend one more night in a bombed house."

After a few seconds of total silence, the other twenty or so people in the room all clapped and the two chess players immediately produced a list of three new addresses with clear directions. They stared at me in amazement.

The addresses were useful this time, and I finally found a room I liked close to the bombed mansion that served as my shelter for a few nights. The landlady was pleasant, the house was large and comfortable and my room was cozy.

On the first day of classes I sat in an enormous amphitheater, surrounded by hundreds of male students, and watched an imperious professor as he wrote unwieldy and esoteric mathematical equations on the blackboard. There were only two other females on the other side of the theater, and they both looked very masculine. I was clearly out of place.

After a couple of weeks I visited the administration building at the UNRRA campus and managed to switch over to the pharmacy school there. I was elated because I could begin to aim for a meaningful future. I hoped the situation in Estonia would improve enough for me to at least visit my family.

I visited Mart and Lennart to get more information about how to survive on my own. They had adjoining rooms in a modern house not too far from the university.

I stopped short as I entered Mart's room. There was a large work table loaded with dozens of small, medium and large rubber stamps, papers of all sizes, shapes and colors and other office materials in the middle of it. There was a compact printing press at the far end of the room and the whole place was permeated by acrid odors of inks and other pungent fluids.

Mart immediately noticed my reaction of surprise and chuckled. "I studied international law in Tartu and managed to bring a lot of supplies with me, including the German stamps and papers." I laughed heartily and walked closer to the table.

Lennart continued, "You will need food and coal ration cards and coupons from the administration building, but if you can't get enough of them, come back to us and we'll manufacture some more for you. When the winter comes, you'll have the warmest room in Munich."

"You've never had a problem with these homemade cards?" I examined a German ration card that looked totally authentic.

"Never!" They both shook their heads from side to side and flashed crafty smiles.

Mart showed me a huge carton of cigarettes. "The Americans are generous enough to give us cartons like this which have enormous

value on the black market. We'll give you names of contacts who can sell them for you, keep a reasonable commission and give you the rest of the money. One carton alone can pay for a month's room rent." He looked triumphant.

"Where do I get the cigarettes?"

"At the administration building," Lennart said and pointed out of the window. "You can also get jars of Nescafe. Would you like some?" He smiled.

"Thank you."We walked over to Lennart's room and talked about world politics and then sipped some excellent coffee.

Mart and Lennart were right; I met a reliable German contact man who sold my cigarettes and invariably gave me very good money for them.

One cold late fall day the man came to my room and I showed him the six silver spoons that Mother gave me just before I left home. I needed a new winter coat and boots and hoped that these were valuable enough to pay for them. "Do you think I could get good money for these spoons? They are authentic."

The man's eyes widened when he saw the insignia of Czar Nicholas II. "Indeed, Fräulein. With a good commission, I will bring you very good money for these works of art." He examined them carefully and held them up to the light and was even more impressed when he rubbed his fingers gently along the imprints of the royal insignia.

The man was true to his word and brought me enough money to buy a fur coat and thick boots. I needed them desperately now because I had rheumatic toe joints and a sensitive bladder from so much exposure to the mercilessly cold weather.

I stood in front of the mirror in my new grey fur coat and black boots. "Thank you, Mother," I whispered as cascades of tears spilled down onto the fur and darkened it with long streaks. "I miss you so much." I tried to send energy waves of gratitude to her. Would she feel them?

It was an early December evening, and Greta and two other students were visiting me because my room was indeed "the warmest room in Munich". Thanks to Mart and Lennart, I had an inexhaustible supply of coal ration cards and I was happy and honored to be the hostess for our frequent evening study sessions.

Greta brought a large, brown package with her tonight. "I have an aunt and uncle in Sweden and they send me care packages once a month. Let's open this one right now and see what they send. We'll share whatever I get."

She cut the strings and the paper and opened the thick cardboard box. We all marveled at the neat array of dried fruit, salted cashews and roasted almonds, chocolates, cheeses and crackers. The mixed aroma was so tantalizing that every stomach growled and rumbled.

Greta started passing out equal shares to all of us. "Are you sure you want to give us so much?" I felt a little guilty.

"Oh, absolutely. I'll be insulted if you don't take a full share." She smiled radiantly at all of us.

As we munched on these delectable goodies, we became high spirited and we laughed giddily. Greta took out a human skull from her large briefcase and placed it on the center of the table. She had to memorize the names and positions of the bones for her dentistry class, and we all laughed even more when we saw the grinning skull.

Suddenly, we heard soft footsteps on groaning wooden stairs. "That must be my landlady. She gets curious when she hears us laughing so much," I said.

My door opened slightly and the landlady glanced directly onto the grinning, macabre skull. She shrieked, staggered backward and ran down the stairs and we laughed explosively.

When Greta recovered from laughing so hard, she said, "I have a new boyfriend who can use his landlord's car quite often. Let's all go to Augsburg this weekend. There's supposed to be a D.P. camp there with a lot of Estonians. We might meet old friends. You never know." She looked infectiously optimistic.

"Of course. Let's all go," I said. I looked forward to finding old friends, if Hilde and Greta could appear in my life again, anything could happen.

We drove toward Augsburg and the scenery became less spectacular. We didn't see the pristine alpine lakes and towering mountains anymore, but I hoped the human landscape would be extraordinary in the camp.

The camp was a collection of modest homes that Hitler built for blue-collar workers during the war. We went to the main office and asked for a list of Estonian refugees. A polite clerk handed us a list and my hands trembled as I scrutinized it. Would someone I knew really be here?

I gasped suddenly when I saw the names of my godmother Inge and her sister Wanda. Were they really here or was this an old list? Which house were they in? I had to go there right away to find them.

The clerk assured us that the two ladies were still living here, so Greta, my other friends and I rushed out of the office to find the right building.

We knocked on the door vigorously and I breathed deeply.

Inge opened the door. "Sonya! I can't believe it." She was as well dressed and dignified as ever. Wanda also appeared at the door with outstretched arms and we all embraced at the doorstep and entered the house.

Several other refugees lived here also and the interior was very ordinary, but adequate.

After exchanging gruesome escape stories, we turned to lighter subjects. "How are your fiancés, or do you know?" I asked them.

Inge stiffened and fingered her pearl necklace. "My fiancé was shot by the Russians soon after he arrived there as an ambassador." She winced with pain.

"Oh, no." I visualized the striking amethyst necklace he gave her and the fabulous car he had.

Wanda also stiffened and told us, "They shot my fiancé also. Can you imagine? Who would want to shoot a reverend?"

"How terrible." I shuddered. "What are you both planning to do now? Are you going to stay in Germany?" Now that I found these two women who were so close to my heart, I couldn't bear to think that I would lose them again.

Wanda got up from her chair and said, "I will bring coffee and pastry for everyone." She was still the same, always volunteering to serve others.

Inge continued, "We want to go to New York and we are waiting for our papers." She looked very determined.

I cringed. I would lose them both again. "Why do you want to leave Germany? You could both get excellent jobs here, I'm sure."

"No one knows what will happen here. Everyone talks about how Stalin may claim more German territory and no one will even try to stop him. He is already too close for comfort." Inge was very sharp and level headed, so she was probably right, but I hated to think about it. I wasn't sure whether to finish my pharmacy degree in Munich or try to immigrate to America or some other place.

"Whatever you do, let's make sure we keep in touch," I told them. Wanda returned with coffee and cakes.

"Of course, of course," Wanda said as she put the coffee on a small table close to the chairs. "Now that you walked into our lives again we will make sure we never lose you." She had that maternally reassuring manner, but there were so many new doubts about my future looming in my mind and I felt extremely restless and anxious.

I thought about Inge and Wanda all the way back to Munich and swore never to lose contact with them again.

It was May of 1948 and I had completed several successful semesters toward my pharmacy degree and continued to enjoy my classes very much. I studied very hard because I didn't want to end up in a D.P. camp.

Inge and Wanda were already settled in New York and I kept their address in my wallet. I checked it every day to make sure it was still there.

Greta, my other friends and I often drove out to the stunning, emerald-green alpine lakes in the surrounding mountains to have picnics. There were many nice young men in our group, but I had no romantic interest in any of them. At least it cheered me to have so many humorous friends.

One lovely, warm evening I was invited by an Armenian student to a big international party at some house on campus.

I arrived at the house around eight and was surprised to find that I was the only guest. After I walked into the living room, the Armenian locked the door and put the key in his pocket. I didn't like this at all. "Where is everyone? I know I did not come early," I looked around furtively.

"You are the only guest. I thought we could spend the evening alone." He put his hands on my shoulders, spoke in a low, soft voice and touched my hair gently. "I love blonde hair," he said. I stared at his almond-shaped eyes and black hair. How was I going to get out of this situation?

He went into the kitchen. "I will make a snack for us," he said as he started pulling pots and pans down from cupboard shelves.

I bolted noiselessly over to a living room window, lifted it up, jumped down onto the pavement and ran as fast as I could. My panic was so intense that my legs felt useless. Buildings seemed to whiz by me, but I couldn't believe it because I had the feeling I was rooted on the spot, just like in a nightmare.

I did not look back until I was about 10 blocks away from that disgusting house. Then I stopped and held on to a lamppost. No one followed me.

In spite of being terribly shaken, I finally managed to stagger back to my landlady's house, open the door and crawl up the stairs to my room.

I fell on the bed and sighed heavily. I was really so vulnerable here all alone, if that man would have managed to make me pregnant, who would I have relied on for any kind of help? People would have just told me it was my own fault for going to a man's house alone. Munich did not feel so welcoming anymore.

I cried myself to sleep, as I did every night.

In the morning there were many more jagged water marks on my pillow.

In late August, Greta and I organized a tremendous costume party for the Estonian students and others on campus and it was a great success. In fact, an American colonel enjoyed himself so much that he wanted to stay with us forever and hoped the party would never end.

But the next morning we all met at the campus restaurant for breakfast and Mart and Lennart did not smile and looked utterly dejected. "What's wrong?" I looked at both of them anxiously.

Mart cleared his throat. "Do you remember the recent article in the newspaper that discussed how unfair the Yalta agreement was for the Baltics?"

"Yes, I read it." This was the first time I saw him in pain.

"Well, a couple of our friends wrote it and they have vanished. No one, not even the police, knows what happened to them."

"No! What could have happened?" I was frightened now.

"Soviet spies are suspected because they make false passports and move easily from one zone of occupation to another looking for outspoken anti-Communists. When they find them, they apprehend them and leave no traces." He mashed his food with a fork and did not eat.

"This is ghastly." I lost my appetite.

Lennart continued where Mart left off. "Not only are Soviet spies after us, but the local Germans have had enough of being forced to cater to foreigners and want all the jobs and university placements for themselves. The police are tracking down and arresting black market dealers because they know that will make it impossible for us to survive." He held his head in his hands and sighed so hard he knocked his paper cup over and coffee spilled all over the table. I grabbed some napkins and soaked it up quickly.

"No wonder my contact man did not appear yesterday. That's not like him," I said pensively.

"I'm sure. The German mark is plummeting also. Even if we could still use the black market, we wouldn't be able to buy anything with nearly worthless currency." Mart slapped his hands on the table.

"I was just beginning to accept my fate as a refugee in Germany. Now what do we do? I hate being a gypsy. I hate it." My throat constricted painfully and I relived the incident with the gypsy on

Father's estate. I tried to suppress her image, but she stuck in my mind and even seemed to be laughing at me.

Mart looked at me with compassion. "I know. I also hate being a refugee, but Stalin may advance further into Germany. Many of our friends are applying to immigrate to America, Canada or Australia. Only a few are brave enough to stay here. What do you think you might do?"

I looked at Mart and Lennart and frowned. "I don't know. What do you think I should do?"

Lennart shifted in his seat nervously and said, "Canada is an underpopulated country, so it might be easier for you to find a good job there. Try talking to someone at the consulate."

"I might," I said and gulped a few times to ease the pain in my throat. Inge and Wanda were in New York, Greta was hoping to go to San Francisco with her American boyfriend, but what was I going to do? There was no doubt that I could no longer stay in Germany.

I went to the Canadian consulate just to glean some information that would perhaps help me make a decision.

I had an interview soon after I arrived at the elegant neoclassical building. The officials seemed to be impressed with my practical pharmacy training and academic background in science and they offered me a job as a nurse trainee at a Quebec City hospital. The only condition was that I would work for at least one year there in order to pay back the government for my trip over to Canada.

At first I wasn't sure whether to accept this offer or go to the American and Australian consulates, but then I thought it would be advisable to accept this concrete offer while it still stood. I couldn't bear to live with the oppressive specter of a totally uncertain future any longer.

Chapter Nine

One cool morning at the end of September in 1948, I stood on a platform in the harbor of Bremerhaven in northern Germany and waited to board the ocean liner that would take me to Canada.

After the platform gate opened I rushed up the stairs, found my cabin and bolted over to the window to watch as we pulled out of the harbor. I remembered the receding fairy tale skyline of Tallinn and my eyes moistened. I felt optimistic about starting a new life, but I already missed my friends and relatives and I checked the various addresses in my wallet to make sure they were still there.

Eventually, the ship stopped in LeHavre to pick up more passengers. That evening I dined on gourmet food while hearing a lot of French conversations around me and noticed an impeccably dressed middle-aged gentleman at a neighboring table who turned his head in my direction frequently.

He came over to my table after dinner when some of my tablemates left and said politely in German, "May I join you?" He had sculptured features, an aristocratic bearing and was unusually articulate.

"Of course." I motioned to the empty seat next to me.

"I am Monsier Deneuve." He kissed my hand. "And you are?"

"I am Sonya." I smiled coyly. "You speak excellent German, but you have a French name." He beamed with pleasure.

"Thank you. I live in Montreal, but I often visit France to see friends and relatives. I studied German for many years at university

and when I saw your lovely blonde hair I took a chance and spoke German right away. Where are you from, mademoiselle?"

"Estonia, originally, but I lived in Munich for a few years."

"Estonia! You must be one of those unfortunate refugees who hopes to start a new life in Canada. Did you know that there are some other Estonian ladies on this boat?" He pulled out a cigarette from a gold metal case and asked me if I wanted to smoke. I told him I didn't.

"No. I didn't know. You met them already and yet you just boarded recently?" I smiled at him.

"I always notice lovely blonde ladies." He laughed softly. "And you are one of the loveliest." He kissed my hand again and I enjoyed the attention from this aristocratic man. "I will introduce you to the other ladies later if you like." He lit his cigarette.

"I would like that very much," I said eagerly.

"I am fascinated by refugees. I am a lawyer and an economist, but I also broadcast occasional news reports and commentaries over the radio in Montreal. Speaking with ladies like yourself provides me with an endless source of information about postwar lives." I enjoyed the sweet aroma of his cigarette and I was very impressed with his education. "What will you do in Canada?"

"I will work in a hospital in Quebec City for a year." I tried to sound enthusiastic.

"Quebec City? Oh." He pursed his lips and shook his head slowly. "It is very small and provincial compared to Montreal. I cannot imagine how you would ever adjust to life there after living in a magnificent city like Munich." He looked at me with sincere concern.

"I have no idea what Quebec City looks like."

He wrote his name and address on a piece of paper and gave it to me. "When you find that you can no longer stand life in Quebec City, please contact me." He touched my arm gently and paternally.

I took the address and put it in my wallet. "Thank you. I will contact you."

"Please do." His gaze became intense and penetrating. This was no ordinary acquaintance.

It was the morning of Oct. 3, we were in the middle of the Atlantic, and it happened to be my 27th birthday. I expected huge waves, but the ocean was quite calm. I was not seasick and I didn't see anyone vomiting over the rails.

I was delighted to speak Estonian with some of the other ladies, they all fled to Germany and then decided to leave that country because the currency became worthless. None of them had an academic background and they all wanted to become domestic servants. I wished them luck.

It was late afternoon when we were on the last stretch of the St. Lawrence River and I enjoyed the rolling hills and pleasant countryside while wondering what Quebec City looked like. We were almost there.

When we pulled into the harbor I moaned, the only impressive building was sitting on top of a small hill and it had brown towers with green conical roofs and looked somewhat like a European castle. All the other buildings were small, drab and nondescript. *Oh, no. I have to spend a year here? I wish I could turn around on this ship and go back to Europe,* I thought. My throat constricted so much I could hardly swallow.

I felt an arm around my shoulders and when I looked slowly to my right I saw Monsieur Deneuve. "Remember, you can contact me any time and I will help you come to Montreal. It is a fantastic city. Promise me you will do that." His voice was low and comforting.

"I promise," I whispered.

He kissed my hand. *"Au revoir, mademoiselle."*

"Goodbye. Thank you." I picked up my luggage and walked down the ramp to the platform. I stopped to look up at the ship and saw Monsieur Deneuve waving at me. I waved back with no enthusiasm.

I did not know one word of French, so I showed the address of the hospital to a harbor official. It turned out that the three-story brick hospital was close to the harbor and to the building that looked like a castle. The man pointed at the little hill and I started walking.

I showed my papers to the hospital receptionist and spoke with a mixture of German, English and frantic sign language. I could only

hope that my name looked familiar to her. What would I do if it didn't? What would I do?

The lady scrutinized my papers for a few minutes, but did not react in any way. What was going on?

Suddenly she exclaimed, "Oh, Sonya!" and continued excitedly in French. Finally. Recognition. She got up from her chair and took me by the hand to meet a lady who looked very authoritative and wore a stiff, white uniform. This must have been the head nurse.

"I know a leetle German," she told me in German and I was enormously relieved. At least I was in the right place and I wouldn't have to go back to the harbor officials to ask for help. "Come upstairs and I weel show you your ruhm." She smiled warmly and offered to help me with my luggage.

She introduced me to my Polish lady roommate, who knew good German. I could relax a little now. This was a bright, warm room with a window overlooking the hospital garden, in which there were nice trees, benches and flagstone pathways.

I worked very hard at helping patients with their daily needs as the weeks passed and the head nurse became even friendlier. She arranged for me to learn French from a retired nurse who wanted to brush up on her German and who lived very close to the hospital and to the "castle", which was called Chateau Frontenac. She was very kind and always offered me coffee and pastries when I visited her.

But my curiosity about my family intensified. Was it now possible to write to the Soviet Union from here? Surely those draconian laws of Stalin couldn't last forever. I had to contact my family, I missed them more and more every day.

One icy, white day in mid-December I wore my fur coat and leather boots and walked along the perilously slippery path to the main post office and practiced the proper French phrases in my mind along the way.

I walked up to the counter with determination. "I would like to send a letter to Estonia."

"What? Where is that? Is that a country or a city?" The clerk looked totally bewildered.

"Estonia! Close to Finland. It is in the Soviet Union now. I must contact my family." I banged my fist on the counter.

"Soviet Union?" a flash of recognition lit up his face. "That is impossible. No mail goes there from here. Out of the question. We are very sorry." His face looked apathetic and nonchalant and I was incredulous.

I stumbled out of the post office and attempted to negotiate the slippery path back to the hospital without falling. My feet slid a lot and I felt that I was losing control of my entire being.

My roommate tried to console me, but it didn't help. I sobbed myself to sleep that night.

In the morning I remembered Mother's words about working until your body aches when your soul feels painfully fragile. Her advice helped me so many times before and would probably help now. I hoped it would.

The patients all seemed to be so grateful when I made my rounds and stayed longer than usual and listened to all their problems. Very often they slid 10 dollar bills into my uniform pocket and I wanted to give them back, but they refused to take them. Many of the patients received luscious potted plants, fresh cut flowers and gourmet chocolates and they insisted that I take some of their gifts.

My room began to look and smell like a combination of a greenhouse and a gift shop. The kindness and gratitude of the patients melted some of the icy despair that encapsulated my soul.

In February of 1949 I received a letter from Inge and Wanda. They both had lucrative jobs in New York. Inge worked as an accountant and Wanda worked for the Red Cross. They lived in a spacious apartment overlooking the Hudson River and they adored the vibrant, international atmosphere of the city.

They also sent me Evald's address and I was elated to know that he was alive. He and Inge's nephew apparently managed to escape from Estonia in small fishing boats and now lived in Sweden. Surely I could write to Sweden? It was a neutral country. I couldn't wait to

read Evald's reply. I thought back to our grade one and two combination class and remembered all the pranks he pulled in the neighborhood. I could still see him sitting in the lap of the Russian onion merchant and setting fire to his long, reddish blond beard.

I wrote back to Inge and Wanda immediately and asked if they could establish contact with Estonia through the Red Cross.

Wanda wrote back and told me that even the Red Cross was denied access to Iron Curtain countries. No contact was possible. Even long distance phone operators could not get through to these countries. I wished I could have strangled Stalin myself. I wouldn't have minded dying in the attempt.

I wrote to Evald and got a reply in March. I was so excited that I couldn't even open the envelope, my hands shook too much. My roommate opened it for me and handed me the letter.

"Dearest Sonya,

I cannot describe how happy I am to hear from you. I have wondered about your fate just as much as you have wondered about mine.

Your cousin Alex and I were in the Soviet army in southern Estonia close to Lake Peipus. We knew that we were to be sent to the front to be used as 'cannon fodder' so we deserted and found some farmers who gave us civilian clothes.

We started walking the long distance to the west coast. We often hid in forests, but Alex was captured by the Russians because he is so tall it's hard for him to hide. They didn't find me.

I eventually made it to the coast and was taken by fishermen to the island of Hiiumaa and then to Stockholm. It was a terribly dangerous trip because the Soviets were using searchlights at night to find people like us.

I found a job as a manual laborer in the shipyards, took Swedish classes in the evenings and then enrolled in the Engineering School. I hope to finish soon.

Unfortunately we cannot communicate with Estonia from here. Even a neutral country like Sweden is anathema to the Soviet regime. Let's see how long this reign of terror lasts.

Your story is just as amazing as mine. It's a miracle you're still alive.

Please write again soon,

Affectionately,

Your old friend,

Evald."

As happy as I was to hear from Evald, I worried very much about Alex. Was he dead, was he in Siberia or did he manage to escape again? Would anyone ever know?

The patients continued to love me and the hospital staff all wanted me to settle in Quebec City, but I was too restless in this provincial environment. My obligatory year was almost over, so I wrote to Monsieur Deneuve and hoped that he would answer.

One warm late September afternoon I sat in the hospital garden and enjoyed the silky air, some of the patients slowly strolled around in dressing gowns and leaned on canes. *"Bonjour, Mademoiselle Sonya,"* they all told me with genuine affection.

Suddenly some maple leaves on a big tree rustled to the right of my bench and I turned sharply and saw Monsieur Deneuve.

"*Bonjour!* I received your letter and came right away. Important decisions are better discussed in person, don't you think?" He shook my hand and sat down beside me. He wore an elegant beige camel hair coat and walked with a slight, affected limp.

"*Bonjour!* I didn't expect you to actually visit me. How kind of you." I shook his hand vigorously.

"My pleasure. I promised you I would help you. Besides, I enjoy the countryside this time of year, it is an artist's paradise when the leaves seem to catch fire." He still looked very sincere and chivalrous. "I have reserved a room for you in a hotel close to McGill University. Why don't you come to Montreal as soon as you are free and then explore the possibilities?"

"Thank you so much. I will definitely do that." My face radiated gratitude, but I wondered what he wanted in return for this gener-

ous offer. No matter what, I had to move to Montreal. So many of the patients told me what a fabulous, exciting city it was.

"My only reward will be to see you happily settled there," he said as if he could read my thoughts. He kissed my hand gently.

Chapter Ten

It was early October, and it was time for me to take the train to Montreal. All the hospital staff came to the station to say goodbye. They didn't want me to leave, and I knew I would miss all of them.

The size of the city of Montreal impressed me as soon as the train pulled into the station in the late afternoon.

I showed the hotel address to a taxi driver and we left the station. There were only low hills in and around the city, but the architecture was stunning. We passed by a bank that looked like an imposing ancient Greek temple and I stared in awe; other buildings had rounded domes and arched windows that looked as if they were transplanted from Renaissance Italy. There were some churches with pointed, greenish spires and golden, gleaming statues. Some sections of the city were closed to cars and had only cobblestone streets lined with elegant gas lamps, trees and attractive restaurants and shops with multi-colored awnings and some people enjoyed the historical flavor by riding in open horse carriages. I felt that a bit of aristocratic Europe magically appeared around me and enjoyed seeing the people smiling and laughing in the streets. Now I knew I was making the right decision. There was a cheerful energy here and I really wanted to find a good job so that I could stay.

I spent the night in a comfortable, old-fashioned hotel with Victorian furniture. Monsieur Deneuve had good taste.

He called me in the morning and asked if he could come to the hotel to meet me for lunch. I told him I was anxious to see him and he was delighted.

At lunch, Monsieur Deneuve suggested that I visit McGill University, find out about taking some courses and look at the list of available jobs in the administration building.

He paid for lunch and assured me that everything would fall into place soon. I hoped it would. How would I live if it didn't? I didn't have much money and I couldn't return to live with my family.

All the buildings of McGill looked solid and impressive, including the administration building. I walked up to the desk of the first secretary I saw and she seemed to have a very friendly face and I hoped I was right.

"May I help you?" She looked up and over her glasses.

"I am hoping to enroll as a student here and to find a job to support myself." I tried to sound as polite as possible.

"Where are you from? Your accent sounds German or Scandinavian." She smiled radiantly.

I gave her a short summary of my background.

"You're in luck. I personally know of a nice couple who recently asked me to find a live-in governess for their two children. They travel a lot and have a very active social life. Are you interested? They're wonderful and kind people." She nodded enthusiastically and looked very reassuring.

"Well, um. I suppose so. I'm not sure. I have to get more information about courses." This offer was so sudden I didn't know what to say.

"Good. I'll call the Smiths right away and ask them if you can meet them soon." She dropped all her other work and started dialing the number immediately because she meant well and tried to make up my mind for me.

The Smiths were indeed wonderful and kind people, they hired me on the spot and made me feel like a member of the family. That secretary at McGill must have been an angel.

They lived in a huge, two floor stone mansion in an exclusive suburb of the city, evergreens and oaks surrounded the house. The

dining room was enormous and every wall in it was lined with mirrors. The whole interior of the house looked as if a professional decorator had just finished working in it.

My suite was five steps down from the entrance hall, was bright and comfortable, and I had my own bathroom and walk-in wardrobe.

They had a baby boy and a charming three-year-old girl and I looked forward to looking after these two adorable children.

Christmas of 1949 was explosively happy. Mrs. Smith served a delicious turkey dinner on the long cherrywood table and lovely Christmas music wafted up from the record player.

Mr. Smith was an executive with a pharmaceutical company that supplied the University of Montreal Medical School with most of its drugs. He sipped his after dinner whiskey and soda and told me, "As much as we love having you with us, we worry about your social life and your future. Let's face it, this is a dead end job for an educated young woman like you."

"But I enjoy it so much and you have helped me to feel at home in Montreal. You cannot imagine what that means to me." I smiled at him and at Mrs. Smith.

He told me about a famous scientist called Dr. Hans Selye who had his own two floor institute at the University of Montreal Medical School and said that he would try to arrange a job interview for me. Apparently, more lab assistants were needed.

It was a frozen afternoon in mid January, 1950, and I waited in Dr. Selye's secretary's office for my interview. I was very nervous because I knew how famous the doctor was; he even knew nine languages.

The secretary eventually looked up from her papers and said, "You can go in now, Miss."

My mouth opened just a little when I gazed around the doctor's huge office, every wall was lined completely from floor to ceiling with books of all sizes and colors and thick, long drapes covered the windows. Dr. Selye was sitting behind a massive mahogany desk and reading.

Presently he looked up and said, "Please sit down, young lady." His whole expression exuded a keen sense of humor, but I remained terribly nervous. I sat down beside a large, ornately framed picture of Albert Einstein.

He spoke in German and asked to see my Munich University transcripts. I handed them over immediately and waited anxiously. He examined them carefully for about a minute and then smiled directly at me. "You have a solid general science background, but do you have any medical laboratory experience?"

I was encouraged by his smile, but I knew I would have to think fast. "No, but I have substantial pharmacy lab training from Estonia and Germany and some practical nursing experience from Quebec City." I tried not to sound aggressive.

"We work with many animals like rats, mice, rabbits, monkeys and dogs here at the institute. You will have to learn anatomy." He laughed softly. "But you can learn that on the job and you can start in February. Does that suit you?" He gazed right into my eyes and I sensed his extraordinary intelligence.

"I am honored. I cannot thank you enough." Could this be true? We both stood and he shook my hand across the desk. Then I picked up my papers and walked toward the door.

"My secretary will give you more details, if you care to see her on the way out," he said as I neared the door.

"Thank you." I smiled at him. The job would be a real challenge, but I had a future now. I was amazed at my good fortune.

The Smiths were overjoyed about my new job and I thanked both of them profusely. They offered to help me find a room closer to the university and wanted me to promise to keep in touch.

In February I moved into a room in a small brick house that was at the bottom of the hill on which the University of Montreal was situated. My landlady seemed to be tolerable.

I climbed up the steep stone steps to reach the top of the hill and saw the large complex of solid buildings from another perspective.

As soon as I reported for work at the lab I wondered if I would be ridiculed or accepted by the more experienced lab assistants. I

walked into a room that reeked of ether and formaldehyde. There were many long work counters, cupboards, sinks, chairs, and specimen bottles and a massive fridge dominated one whole corner. Some large black and white rats were curled up in huge wide mouth jars and their bodies were making slight breathing movements.

Two friendly workers in white lab coats introduced themselves to me and immediately began to explain the experimental procedures I would be learning shortly.

They presented me with a little white mouse that I had to anaesthetize. I marveled at its soft, white fur and cute little pink paws, it seemed to trust me and it nuzzled its nose and whiskers against my palm and I enjoyed the tickling sensation.

By the end of the day I felt confident that the lab workers had accepted me. They told me they looked forward to teaching me more procedures and urged me to visit the YMCA not too far from the university because many recent immigrants met there.

After a couple of weeks of working at the lab, I decided to go to the YMCA in the evening. I arrived at the pleasant brown brick building and stopped to examine the prominent, large bulletin board in the entrance hall. Many ethnic folk festivals were advertised and I studied one bulletin in particular printed by "Norwegian Vikings".

Suddenly I felt a tap on my shoulder and I turned around sharply and stared right into Hilde's grinning face. We both shrieked with excitement and embraced so vigorously we nearly lost our balance.

"Hilde, you crazy character, here you are again in my life."

"Sonya, you look fantastic," she said and shook my shoulders.

"So do you, you firecracker, you." I laughed like a child.

"Come and see where I live," she said eagerly.

"Let's go," I said without hesitation.

We arrived at a huge brick mansion and entered through the side door. "I'm the live-in governess for these people. He is a prominent lawyer and his wife is a writer. They're in Mexico right now." I gazed at the French Provincial furniture and the thick velvet drapes. "It's fabulous, isn't it?" We walked around and admired everything. "But

they can't really enjoy their wealth because their 12-year-old son is severely retarded."

"Oh, no! How awful." I gasped.

"I know. The poor boy has to stay home all day. Looking after him is a hell of a job. He howls like an animal and tries to jab himself with sharp things. I don't know how much longer I'll be able to stand it." She sighed and looked despondent.

"To change the subject, have you been able to write home at all?" I almost hated to hear the answer.

"Shit, no! Those bloody Commies have cut everything the hell off." As tragic as this situation was, I couldn't help laughing explosively at her speech because it reminded me of the way Tallinn's harbor workers spoke. She laughed also.

"How do you like Montreal?" I asked her.

"I love it. I have many French boyfriends, oooh, la, la! They're all damned handsome, too. I go out with two of them on Saturdays, we stay out all night, and then we go to Mass at dawn." Her whole body exuded mirth and mischief.

"Mass!" I laughed. I could imagine Hilde and her two boyfriends trying to look serious as they gazed at the priest. Then I remembered the day at school when she told me that Adam was smitten by me and the day she rushed into the pharmacy in Boden See. What was going to happen next?

"You must have boyfriends." She winked and nudged me on the arm. "Tell me about them." She looked as eager as a child waiting for a chocolate bar.

I giggled. "I don't have any now. There is an older gentleman who helped me come to Montreal. He calls me once in a while and takes me out for dinner occasionally, but he is not really a boyfriend." I was happy that Monsieur Deneuve continued to be a good and chivalrous friend.

"You wait and see. A gorgeous woman like you working in a place with so, so many men." She rolled her eyes up toward the ceiling and flashed a knowing smile at me. She never failed to amuse me and she still had that laugh that could shake the dead.

One fine morning in April I walked down the hall of the institute to deliver a message to a secretary. I passed by the seminar room on the way to her office and stopped short and backtracked a little.

The door was wide open and Dr. Selye, who had proven that emotional stress affects one's health, sat at the center of an enormous U-shaped conference table. A large blackboard covered with chemical formulae rested on the wall right behind him and 12 young doctors dressed in white lab coats also sat around the table and concentrated on his oracular plans for research experiments.

I gazed at the young men and suddenly remembered the clairvoyant in Boden See for the first time since I left that area. "You will go far, far west and you will work in a place where everyone wears a white coat and two of the young men there will want to marry you." I had already assisted several of these doctors with their experiments. Would two of them really want to marry me? Impossible.

A few days later I assisted one of the nicest doctors with a dissection. His name was Jean, he was tall, thin, and had dark hair that contrasted sharply with pale skin and azure eyes.

I looked up occasionally from the lab table and noticed him staring at me with an infinitely dreamy longing. I was definitely not imagining things, Jean was attracted to me.

"Let's go for a drive out to the country this weekend. Would you like to?" He smiled sweetly.

"Of course." I smiled and tried not to sound too eager.

Jean picked me up in a racy, dark green sports car one Saturday morning and we headed out to a small lake in the middle of a mixed forest. He loved to drive fast and I found this very exciting.

We got out of the car and began to walk slowly around the misty lake. A few pink, yellow and white buds swayed in the cool breeze and I stared at the multi-colored reflections in the clear, greenish blue water and sighed with pleasure. The sun emerged through the clouds and the water shimmered.

"I don't know if you heard, but I had tuberculosis a few years ago and had to spend one year in a Swiss sanatorium to recover," he said.

"I didn't know. Did you make a full recovery?" I was shocked.

"Yes, thank God," he said as he took my right hand in his. It felt warm and strong.

"Are you religious?" I asked him.

"Yes! Very much so. I come from a large Catholic family and we never miss the early Sunday Mass," he said and smiled.

We continued to walk around the lake and I couldn't help wondering if he really had recovered from tuberculosis completely or if it would return. I was also disturbed by the fact that he was obviously a devout Catholic. How could I tell him that the horrors I witnessed destroyed my faith in an omnipotent and benign supreme being?

"What religion are you?" He asked me eagerly.

"Lutheran," I told him without hesitation because I didn't want to destroy our relationship.

"Oh," he said and looked right into my eyes with great curiosity. We then moved on to neutral subjects like lab experiments and travelling.

We sat down on a bench and he told me he would very much like to go out with me again and I was very happy about that.

A couple of weeks after my country outing with Jean, some lady colleagues at work told me, "Jean is not the only man who is interested in you, you know." I laughed. "The Greek one, George. He sure notices you." I laughed even more.

"I've worked for him and I don't sense any attraction," I said to them.

"You wait and see. We see how he looks at you," they said with amused conviction.

I passed by one of the walk-in freezers one late afternoon and I saw George picking up some monkey food cans. I stopped and laughed softly. "I didn't know you do research with monkeys as well as with rats and rabbits."

"I don't. This will be tonight's dinner. I only get 250 dollars a month from the university, so I don't have enough money to eat properly every day. By the way, would you like to come over to my

place one evening for dinner? I promise I won't serve you monkey food." He smiled, put the cans down on a shelf and walked over to me. He was of medium height and build and had a few strands of fine black hair framing his large head. His little horn-rimmed glasses were perched on an aquiline nose and sat under a high and rounded forehead, his brown eyes looked very restless even behind the glasses. He was not quite as handsome as Jean, but he was attractive and looked intriguing.

"All right, I'll come. Thank you." I began to think my colleagues may have been right.

"Good! Come over tomorrow evening at seven." He sounded very enthusiastic.

George's apartment was in a modest building not too far from the university. "Hello! Come in," he said soon after I knocked on the door.

When I entered I saw a few crooked chairs, wooden apple boxes and a couple of standing lamps graced with hanging neckties and I smiled to myself at this Bohemian atmosphere. "My younger brother lives with me and usually keeps the place tidy, but he went to a party tonight. Please have a seat." He gestured toward the crooked chairs.

I walked toward the one that looked like it might not collapse and sat down. George sat down next to me on an apple crate. "Would you like a drink? I have beer and wine." He spoke quickly and with a lot of nervous energy.

"I'll have some beer, please. My father used to make beer and I hated it when I was little, but I learned to like it in the Munich beer halls." I shifted gingerly in my seat.

"Ah, yes. Munich. I started studying medicine in Berlin, but finished my degree in Vienna. I also enjoyed the beer halls and student *gemütlichkeit*." He spoke flawless German without a foreign accent and I was very impressed. He jumped up to go and get the drinks.

When he came back with two glasses of foamy, golden beer, I asked him, "Why did you leave Greece to study in Berlin and Vienna?"

"Germany and Austria had the best medical schools on the continent," he said with great conviction. He raised his glass and said, *"Prosit!"* I cheered also and sipped some of the bitter beer.

"How could you afford to study so far away from home?"

"My stepfather made a fortune by curing Turkish pashas of syphilis with silver nitrate. He always treated me as if I were his own son and gave me the money to study. He was a urologist, but he is retired now." We both sipped more beer.

"Stepfather? Turkish pashas? I thought you were Greek."

"My biological father was an army doctor who was killed in 1921 while serving in the Greco-Turkish war. The Greeks were foolish enough to try to win back our ancient city of Constantinople and other parts of Asia Minor that were ours for centuries, but Kemal Ataturk was a fierce opponent who mercilessly crushed the Greek offensive and managed to expel or kill every Greek living on the coast. I was born in Smyrna, and I was just two years old when my mother took me on board a ship headed for Athens. In fact, my first memory is of gigantic flames shooting up to the sky over the city. I stood on the deck and stared." He threw his head back and gulped down the rest of the beer. I felt that we had a lot in common.

He continued with the passion of a priest giving a fiery sermon, "One and a half million Greeks lived in and around Smyrna on the coast and the ones who could not escape in ships or fishing boats were massacred by the Turks. International relief boats were so overloaded that they actually had to beat some swimmers away. Many drowned. It was shocking."

"I had no idea these horrible things happened in Asia Minor," I said as I shuddered.

"Most people don't know," he said and sighed. "Many refugees ended up in squalid Athens slums, but we were lucky because my stepfather sent his money out to Switzerland before the debacle." He continued to speak with restless energy.

I was attracted to him, but I also liked Jean very much and I wished I could talk to Mother or Lara about this situation.

He jumped up from the apple crate again. "We're so busy talking I almost forgot about dinner. I'll make the spaghetti right now. It will only take a few minutes before it is 'al dente'." His full sensual lips formed a half smile.

"What is 'al dente'?" I felt foolish.

"The spaghetti is not overcooked and can be felt by one's teeth," he said as he ran to the kitchen.

Soon we sat down at the wobbly dinette in the large kitchen and I enjoyed the 'al dente' pasta and the sweet and sour tomato sauce he made. It was an entirely new taste for me. We had more beer also.

"What kind of music do you like?" He looked genuinely curious.

"Many kinds. I used to win folk dance contests and I listen to classical music when I need courage, but Hungarian gypsy music really puts me on fire. I remember my brother playing gypsy tunes on his violin in our garden. We had a huge estate, you know. I used to get lost in our own forest, and now I don't even know if anyone in my family is alive or dead or what has happened to our land." I started to heave and sob and salty water drops fell into my dish and I had trouble breathing.

George touched my arm gently. "Try to forget about all that. You've lost all these things, so now you have to concentrate on the future." He offered his handkerchief and dangled it under my nose.

I pushed it away. "Lost? Lost? My family and land may still be there. I will go back and claim what is rightfully mine one day. How dare you tell me I've lost everything?" My voice was hoarse, I lost my appetite and I was furious and mortally sad at the same time.

My dinner was only half eaten. George had finished his in just a few seconds. I pushed my chair back from the table. "I have to get up very early tomorrow because one of the other doctors wants me to assist him with a special project." I rushed to the hall to get my coat and he ran after me. I tried to be polite. "Thank you for the nice dinner. Goodbye!" He helped me with my coat.

"Try to calm down. Please stay a little longer. Please!" He was stubborn and persuasive.

"No! I must go." I walked out of the apartment without looking back.

"I'll see you at work," he called out after me. I was amazed he still wanted to see me again after my uncontrollable outburst.

Right after work the next day I went to the main post office in downtown Montreal. I almost knew what the answer would be, but I had to find out for sure.

I walked up to the chief clerk. "I would like to send a letter to Estonia, please." My voice quivered.

"Estonia? What is that?" The clerk looked bewildered.

I sighed heavily and told him what it was.

"I am sorry, mademoiselle, but no mail goes to the Soviet Union from here or from anywhere else in Canada." He gave me a Gallic shrug and opened his hands in a gesture symbolizing futility. I glared at his impassive face and then stormed out of the building.

I ran up the stairs to my room, turned on the radio and hoped to find some classical music, my fingers fumbled as I tried to adjust the knob.

Eventually I found an orchestral piece by Debussy and slowly began to calm down. I thought of my family and swore that I would contact them somehow. Some of them must still have been alive because I often saw Mother in my dreams, in the meantime, I would work harder and harder at the institute to try to suppress my excruciating pain.

A few days later, I assisted Jean with a delicate operation. I had to remove the left kidney from a large, sharp-toothed and ferocious rat that needed more than the usual dose of ether to be anaesthetized. The extra ether even made Jean and me a little sleepy, so we both tried extra hard to concentrate on using our steel instruments with utmost precision.

After the operation Jean put his instruments down on the counter and gazed at me without wavering and I could feel the intensity of his gaze and my hands trembled a little as I put my own instruments down. I looked into his eyes and saw the affection he obviously had for me, I was more confused than ever.

"Let's go out this weekend," he said with quiet confidence.

"All right," I said and smiled coyly. Could he see my hands tremble?

Jean and I dined in an elegant restaurant on lobster with melted butter, potatoes au gratin and scrumptious vegetables. We had a bottle of French champagne in an ice bucket beside our table and our formally attired waiter, who had a white linen napkin over his arm, walked over often to make sure our glasses were full. I could not remember the last time I ate such a divine meal and I ate slowly so that I could enjoy it fully.

"Do you enjoy working for George?" he asked me.

"Sometimes, but he is such a perfectionist that he demands that certain things be done over and over again," I said. Why was he talking about George?

"That's what I hear. He's also moody, but that may be because he's an immigrant who's desperately trying to prove himself." Jean sipped some champagne. I wasn't sure what to say. Did he know I went to George's apartment for dinner?

"George has several exotic girlfriends, you know," he said and smiled slyly.

"I didn't know," I said, but I did remember seeing pictures of brunettes in his apartment.

"Sonya, I would like you to meet my parents one of these days," he said and tapped my arm. Maybe that was why he talked about George, he didn't want competition from him and was trying to find out how I felt about him.

"I am flattered." I sipped champagne to soothe my nervously dry throat and the tiny bubbles burst with tingling flavor.

"They are coming back from France at the end of August and then you can come over to our house for dinner." He looked at me affectionately.

"Thank you very much," I said and finished my drink. I didn't think Jean would have asked me to meet his parents unless his feelings for me were strong. But what was I going to say to such devout Catholics?

A couple of weeks after the lobster dinner with Jean I returned to my landlady's house after work and heard Hungarian gypsy music emanating from my room as I climbed up the stairs. "What's going on?" I asked my landlady. I was quite annoyed.

"A young gentleman is in your room. I'm sorry I let him in without your permission, but he was so insistent that I could not refuse him." She shrugged her shoulders and tried to look sympathetic.

I walked into my room and saw George sitting next to a record player placed on my desk. Some 78 r.p.m. records were on display beside the machine and he looked at me eagerly, as if to gain approval for his actions.

When I heard the tune 'As a Bud Blossoms Into a Rose' I couldn't help smiling because only the incomparable gypsy violinists could have played with such nostalgic passion. The soloist played alone slowly for a while and was then joined by a string ensemble and a zither. Then the piece suddenly became fast and fiery, in true czardas style. To me, the whole song symbolized the supreme courage one needs to survive in a cruelly turbulent world. I wanted to cry, laugh and dance all at once. The gypsy of Father's estate flashed through my mind again, I had actually become a gypsy myself.

George jumped up from the chair. "Do you like the music? I bought the record player and the records for you." He smiled broadly and pointed toward the machine.

"You went to a lot of trouble," I said softly.

"No trouble. My pleasure. Let's go out tonight."

We went to a bar close to the university and I could barely see George sitting next to me because of the dark and the smoke, but the cheerful song 'Put Another Nickel In' played in the nickelodeon and I relaxed immediately.

"You sometimes go out with that tall giant Jean, don't you?" George said as he shifted in his seat a lot.

"He's tall, but he's not a giant," I said.

"Yes, well. His health is not good and he is not international enough for you. His ancestors came to Quebec 200 years ago. His family know nothing about Europe."

"But his parents visit France and Jean himself was in a Swiss sanatorium."

"What can you learn about Europe in a sanatorium?" he said sarcastically.

I steered the conversation over to neutral subjects and we enjoyed a couple of drinks while listening to the nickelodeon.

No matter how hard I worked at the lab during regular hours, no matter how many volunteer hours I worked during the evenings and weekends, no matter how kind my co-workers and Dr. Selye were, I sometimes suffered debilitating panic attacks because I missed my home so much and felt vulnerable, lonely and isolated. These attacks could strike at any time and when they happened at work I usually tried to go outside for a few minutes and stand under the trees.

One hot and humid day in July I sat on a bench outside and ate my sack lunch. I tried to overcome a sudden panic attack by breathing deeply and looking over the trees at the sky. A stray dog ambled over to me and rested his muzzle on the empty part of the bench beside me. He whined a little and looked at me with soulful eyes. I patted his head and he stopped whining and rested his head on my feet. I also felt a lot better.

When I went back to the lab, George barged in and sat down beside me. "You know, we complement each other very well. I have almost finished my doctorate in experimental medicine and just got a job offer from the University of British Columbia Medical School. I am to start as an assistant professor there in September and you can assist me with my research. Let's get married here and then head out west." He sounded as restless, stubborn and persistent as ever and I never expected to receive a marriage proposal in the antiseptic environment of a research lab. I was flattered, but I couldn't make a decision like this on the spot.

"I need more time to think about this," I said in a subdued voice.

"I hope you don't need too much time," he said as he rushed out of the lab.

How I wished I could have spoken to Mother or to Lara. Jean had not yet proposed, but I knew he was serious about me and I was very attracted to him. But George had so much in common with me and his parents were far away in Greece, so I wouldn't have had to worry about conforming to an ultra religious lifestyle. I began to favor George and feared that if I delayed my answer too long I would lose him and I didn't yet have a proposal from Jean. Then what would

I do? It was time to marry again. I couldn't bear this searing loneliness anymore. But should I have waited for Jean to propose? What if he never would?

George practically smothered me with flowers every day at work and at home for the next two weeks. Wherever I turned, there were lovely bouquets of dark red roses, pink and white carnations and baby's breath for me. He was so incredibly persistent that I decided to accept his proposal.

One evening in late July George came over to my landlady's house with a huge bouquet of mixed flowers whose perfume sent me into ecstasy. "I accept your proposal," I told him.

"Wonderful," he said and kissed my cheek.

The news of the engagement spread around the institute rapidly. Everyone knew about it by noon the next day and I dreaded having to work for Jean in the afternoon.

I walked over to Jean's lab and began my duties and looked up occasionally to see him staring at me with deeply mournful eyes. My hands trembled so much that I had to put my instruments down on the counter and excuse myself from the room.

George wanted me to meet his stepfather Evangelos, who was visiting from Athens. As soon as I walked into his apartment one evening I met a shortish, silver-haired, distinguished gentleman who stood up and offered his hand. *"Bonsoir,"* he said and smiled with palpable kindness. His handshake was warm and genuine. George introduced us formally and then went to the kitchen to prepare drinks.

When we were alone, Evangelos told me, "George is terribly ambitious and can be moody, but I love him as if he were my own son. He loves you very much and I hope you will be able to wipe away the melancholy moods he sometimes gets. Of course, I wish you all the happiness in the world." His eyes looked disarmingly kind and intelligent and I even liked the crinkles in the skin around them.

"I'll do my best to make him happy. How long will you stay in Montreal?"

"I will go back to Athens a few days after your wedding." He was relaxed and at ease.

"Is your wife well?" I wondered why she was not here.

"She is well, thank you, but she could not come here this time." I hoped she was as nice as Evangelos.

Mrs. Smith helped me to prepare for the wedding and we didn't have much time because August 12 was just two weeks away. I had to make my own wedding dress and I hated to do this because there was an old Estonian taboo against making one's own dress, it was supposed to bring back luck. But Lara made my dress when I married Adam and I had bad luck anyway.

Oh, yes. I had to officially declare that Adam had disappeared before I could marry George. It was one more bureaucratic detail to take care of before the wedding.

It was a balmy afternoon on Aug. 12 and Jean was the best man at our wedding, which took place in a small church close to the Smiths' house. Right after the ceremony Jean handed me a small bunch of wild flowers and said, "I hope you will be happy." The look of remorse in his eyes was so pitiful I turned my head away.

The Smiths hosted a lovely reception at their mansion. Dr. Selye and most of the staff from the institute were there and I was happy to see Evangelos again.

We were to leave for Vancouver the next day. George had an excellent job, but what would life be like there?

Chapter Eleven

We left Montreal by train Aug. 13, 1950.

I was fascinated by the undulating prairie landscape in central Canada, but George hardly ever looked out of the window because he was totally absorbed in his study of several voluminous textbooks. "Don't you want to enjoy the scenery a little? How often are you going to cross Canada?" I asked him.

"I would like to, but I have to give 90 lectures this year. I have to begin preparations now, and, on top of that, I still have to finish my Ph.D. thesis. But you go ahead and enjoy the landscape," he said and smiled. He returned to his studying right away.

I gazed at the isolated farmhouses and wondered how some people could stand the loneliness.

Then I glanced down at a book in George's lap. A telegram written in strange letters sat between the pages like a bookmark. He picked it up, read it, placed it back between the pages and a few seconds later he repeated his actions.

"What is that? It looks like a telegram," I said softly.

"It's from Athens. My mother sent it to me just before our wedding," he said nervously.

"I suppose she sends us her best wishes?" I found it very strange that his mother did not communicate with me yet.

He did not reply and this was very peculiar because he usually talked rapidly and incessantly, like a machine-gun. He folded the telegram and put it in his pocket.

After a few days we arrived in Vancouver around noon. The city had a backdrop of stunning, high mountains with jagged peaks, but there was a forbidding, lonely grandeur about them, it was as if the Great Spirit of the Native Indians did not want to be disturbed. The grey Pacific Ocean stretched out into an awesome eternity.

There were many deciduous trees throughout the city, but the buildings were ordinary and rather depressing, some homes were wooden and others were stucco, but most were small. The downtown was small and nondescript and no one smiled or laughed in the streets. There was no comparison to Montreal at all. Where was all the architectural beauty, the excitement, the glamour? Maybe I would feel better after meeting more people.

We moved into a cheap, flimsy apartment close to the university. At least some shops were near, so I could walk over to buy groceries. George took the bus to work.

I accompanied him one day to the Medical School and was stunned to see a collection of temporary, white wooden huts. The only traditional buildings on campus seemed to be the quasi Gothic stone library and the chemistry building.

George came home from work one afternoon in late August and the sun vanished, only a bit of greyish white fog hovered in the streets and the dampness seeped through the windows. He sipped a cup of coffee and reread his mother's telegram.

"Now you have to tell me what the telegram says. I insist." I stood squarely in front of him and stared at him.

"All right," he sighed. "My mother did not want us to get married at all. The telegram says, 'This wedding must not take place under any circumstances'."

I gasped. "Why?"

"Because you are not Greek and because she knows you have no money. She wanted me to marry a rich Greek girl. In my country a girl must have a dowry in order to marry." I remembered the German woman in Boden See who didn't want her precious son to marry a refugee. And to think that I used to be wealthier than the German woman and George's mother put together.

"Why didn't you tell me all this before the wedding? Why didn't Evangelos say anything to me? It would have been his duty." I raised my voice because I felt betrayed and cheated.

"I didn't want anything to ruin our relationship. We will make it work, no matter what. Forget about my mother." He put his arms around me. "I love you. You must believe me." He kissed me passionately on the mouth, and I tried hard to forget about the telegram.

Soon after this incident, I discovered that I was pregnant. I told George and expected him to be happy, but he was shocked. "How come you got pregnant so fast? We don't have enough money to support a child and I need you to assist me in the lab." His face drained of color, his lips quivered a little and I smiled wryly because he looked like a frightened schoolboy.

I visited a gynecologist in downtown Vancouver and told him about our situation. He laughed and showed me a big picture of his wife and six children. "You are almost 29 years old. That is a perfect age for having your first child. George can find someone else to help him in the lab until you feel ready to return to work." He was such a kind and noble man and his words impressed me so much that I decided to go ahead with the pregnancy.

The peninsula on which the university was situated was a very cold and windy place, but we moved there so that George could walk to work and we found a decent apartment in a small, two floor grey stucco building. His salary was very low, so most of our furniture was second hand. We had some ordinary chairs and a grey love seat that could also serve as a pull-out couch in the living room, but at least we had a new blond oak dining room table and matching buffet. We couldn't afford end tables, so I covered two apple crates with frilly material and hoped the wood didn't show.

The pregnancy made me feel nauseated and exhausted, so I stayed on the grey couch most of the day and slept. Occasionally I got up to look outside. We had continuously dark, rainy weather for months and I sometimes wondered if I would ever see the sun again. The bare maple trees looked like they were reaching out in desperation to the sky and the foghorn sounded like a death knell.

The sun finally appeared in May and I ventured out for a walk one morning in front of the apartment building. The baby was due around May 28, which was 11 days away. I often felt it kicking in my womb.

I walked very slowly and when I looked down my left foot was just about to step on something thin and black that slithered away from me. No! It was a small snake. I got such a shock that I started trembling violently and uncontrollably and sticky water oozed down my legs.

I staggered to the door, struggled up the stairs, entered our apartment and wobbled over to the phone. Still shaking, I tried to call my gynecologist. I kept getting wrong numbers, but I finally got him on the phone. "Water is running out of me like mad." My voice faltered.

"It's the womb water. You must get to the hospital immediately. I'll meet you there." He sounded calm and reassuring.

The secretary at the Medical School told me that George was too busy teaching to come to the phone. I had to call a taxi. But I had no money.

The cab driver was very sympathetic as we raced to the hospital. "Don't worry about the money. I'll get it much later." He helped me up the stairs when we got to the hospital.

I was lying down in a ward with many beds around me and a nurse drew a light blue curtain around my bed and my gynecologist arrived soon afterward. "I will give you an injection that will start the contractions right away. Once the womb water breaks, the baby must come out." He held my hand. "Don't worry."

Soon after the injection I went into labor and some men wheeled me down a long, shiny corridor. A mask was put over my face when I cried out in pain and then I faded away.

I was totally disoriented, all I knew was that I suffered through intense pains that were followed by short periods of relief.

On May 18, sometime in the evening, a nurse stood beside my bed and held a screaming baby. I was in a daze and slowly turned my head toward the nurse. "Here is your daughter," she said and smiled. She then put the baby on my chest and I held her in my weak arms.

"Bless you," I whispered to my baby and then fell asleep.

I was only home with my baby for two days when George announced that his mother and brother were soon coming to visit us and that they were to stay in our apartment. "What? I cannot handle visitors now. I feel dreadfully weak and I can barely look after myself and the baby. Why do they have to come now?" I tried to raise my voice and sound annoyed.

"Everything will be fine. Don't worry," he said. He seemed to be very happy that his relatives were coming and I felt too weak to protest any longer.

The arrival day was here. George and his brother greeted me, brought valises into the apartment, talked excitedly in Greek, and I heard the slow click-clack sound of sharp heels coming up the bare wooden stairs that led up to our second floor residence. I dreaded having to meet Elektra, my mother-in-law.

George and his brother swarmed around her like worker bees around their queen as soon as she appeared at the door. She spoke loudly to them and made sweeping, grandiose gestures with her arms. She barely noticed me as she walked in and threw her huge black purse on the couch. Eventually, she said, *"Bonjour,"* as she flashed a sly smile and looked me over carefully.

Elektra was short, very plump and wore the highest black patent pumps I had ever seen. She wore a light green coat over a candy pink dress and her rounded face was heavily painted with black eyebrow pencil, rouge and dark pink lipstick. She had small, sly eyes and her hair was thin, short, brown and curly.

"Bonjour," I said quietly. What kind of a woman was this? I would have never believed that a gentleman like Evangelos would have married a loud and ostentatious woman.

Elektra walked around the apartment proudly and chose my room for herself. George ran over to me. "Mother insists on having that room. You will have to sleep on the couch and the baby can stay in a crib beside you. I will get a cot for my brother." I stared at him in disbelief. How long were they going to stay?

One week passed and I was totally exhausted because I was expected to cook and clean up after everyone and no one even asked

how I felt. Elektra ignored me most of the time and spent hours on the phone and socialized with other Greeks George knew. I was always relieved when some of them came to pick her up for a while.

Whenever she did condescend to speak to me in French, she stuck to 'small talk' and ended the conversation with a sarcastic little laugh.

One afternoon, about 10 days after the arrival of George's relatives, I felt dangerously weak. I sat in a chair and feared that I no longer had the strength to stand up. I tried to stand, but I collapsed on the floor. I was frightfully dizzy and felt that the room was swaying. All the adults were gone for the day.

I tried to scream, but no sound came out of my mouth and my lips touched the bare hardwood floor and I could taste the varnish. My baby, Karin, screamed continually and I tried to call for help, but I still couldn't utter a sound.

I crawled over to the closest wall and knocked on it a few times. Even my arms felt next to useless, but I hoped the neighbors would hear my knocks and guess that something was terribly wrong. I hoped I wouldn't die now. What would happen to Karin?

Where was I? I woke up in a strange bed and I could smell something pungent and antiseptic and the walls were bare and everything looked bland. I heard metals clanging against each other and some women walked around in a tremendous hurry.

A man in a white coat appeared beside me to my right. "Who are you?" I whispered.

"I am a doctor and I will be asking you a few questions. There is nothing to worry about." His voice was low and reassuring. He sat down beside me, opened up a large notebook and took a pen out of his coat pocket.

He questioned me for what felt like an hour and asked me about my life, my hopes, regrets and desires.

When he finished, he said, "Thank you for being patient. I am pleased to tell you that I think you are mentally competent."

"You are a psychiatrist?" I was alarmed now.

"Yes, I am. You apparently collapsed because your pregnancy depleted your body of a lot of essential minerals. However,

your mother-in-law thinks you are prone to epilepsy and says that you are not mentally competent enough to bring up your own child. She asked me to examine you and hopes that I will agree with her. Obviously, I don't agree with her even though she claims to be a doctor of some kind." He spoke rapidly now and I wanted to scream, but hot tears ran down my cheeks instead.

I gulped a few times before I could speak. "I'm glad you don't agree with my mother-in-law." My voice was barely audible.

"You may have heard how easy it is to declare a woman mentally or emotionally incompetent and to place her in an institution in this country." He studied his notes.

"No, I have not heard about that," I whispered.

"Well, I will make sure that you are not placed in an institution because of your collapse." He sounded genuinely sympathetic, but I was shocked to hear how easy it was to remove a woman from society. Then it dawned on me that I was facing the worst enemy of my entire life. The war and the Cold War were impersonal enemies, but Elektra was a personal enemy who was determined to destroy me and she was clever enough to know all my weak points. I desperately called out to Mother in my mind.

Soon after the doctor left I fell asleep and saw Mother in a dream. Dressed in a colorful folk costume, she handed over Father's shotgun to me and smiled and said, "Fight!"

I woke up and called out, "Mother!" The dream was so realistic that she seemed to be alive. She had to be. Was she?

After three weeks of torture, George's brother moved into his own apartment and Elektra went back to Athens and I was immensely relieved.

I was home from the hospital now and felt some of my strength returning. I questioned George about the incident with the psychiatrist. "What do you think about this? Do you realize that a different, dishonest psychiatrist could have had me committed? What excuse do you have for your mother?" I hated confrontations like this, but I had to stand up for my rights.

"I had no idea that my mother asked a psychiatrist to question you." He was nervous and breathless.

"Really?" I raised my voice. I wasn't so sure I believed him.

"Yes! My mother is, unfortunately, a very strong-willed woman and she often takes matters in her own hands without consulting anyone." Now he sounded annoyed and waved his hands in the air.

"Do you think she did a nice thing?" I glared at him.

"No, but she obviously had some concerns."

"The hell with her," I shouted and then walked out of the apartment and slammed the door.

"Wait! Come back," he said as he ran after me.

"I'm going for a walk and I want to be alone," I said as I walked down the creaky stairs.

I walked around the neighborhood and thought about my predicament. Obviously I could never trust Elektra again because she was a mortal enemy. But George? I wasn't so sure what to think, he seemed to love me, but Elektra had some mysterious power over him. Maybe this power would wane with time, but I had to watch him carefully. I cared about him very much, but I wished I could trust him fully.

At the end of the summer I went to the main post office in downtown Vancouver because Mother looked so real in my dreams and I had to find a way to communicate with my family.

As usual, the clerks did not even know where Estonia was and they told me that no mail went through to the Soviet Union. How long was this insane situation going to last? It should have been against international law.

It was November of 1953 and George remained incredibly busy. He taught all day and conducted research in the evenings and on weekends. Sometimes I assisted him in the lab, but the university administrators did not allow me to receive a salary because they did not approve of man and wife teams.

Karin was two years old and she amused me every day. I bought her a few cheap toys and watched her play unusual games with them. One of the toys was a stuffed penguin that was only a little smaller

than she was and when you wound it up it started walking, swaying from side to side and flapping its wings and Karin walked right behind it and imitated the penguin's every move.

I spent a lot of time with her and tried to bond with her as much as possible. I wanted to be a really good mother so that she would reciprocate my affection and grow to be a real friend and ally. I was delighted to have my own flesh and blood around me every day and George was very fond of her, too.

One penetratingly damp and foggy morning in December I received a letter from San Francisco. I ripped open the envelope and read Greta's letter, she wanted to visit Vancouver in February to see me and an old Estonian boyfriend and she was restless because her Jewish boyfriend, the FBI agent who helped her and her mother immigrate to the States, had not proposed marriage yet.

I reminisced about the exciting times we had in Munich and I held the letter close to my heart.

Then I heard a loud knock on the door, opened it and saw a familiar young man. It took me a few seconds to recognize Paul.

"Remember me? I was one of Adam's friends." He handed me a small bouquet of white and pink carnations and I loved their crisp cinnamon fragrance.

"Of course! How wonderful to see you. Please come in." I motioned toward the living room and led him in. "Thank you so much for the flowers." I put them in a vase and we sat down on the grey couch. "How on earth did you find me?" I smiled and laughed nervously.

He grinned at me just the way he did when he played the piano at Adam's parties. "I am an engineering student at UBC and I heard from an Estonian medical student that one of his professors is married to an Estonian woman called Sonya. We went to the secretaries and asked for the home address."

"I'm so glad you're here." I laughed heartily and touched his arm. "You must have quite a story to tell. Did you escape to Sweden first? Several men did."

"Yes! Nearly got killed doing it, but fate was on my side. Many people were not so lucky. I actually saw some of them drown." I

moaned and put my hand over my mouth. "Anyway, I am happy to be alive and living in a free country. You know, there are 15 Estonian students at UBC and we meet at my apartment regularly. You should come and visit us." He wrote the address on a piece of paper and gave it to me.

"I will, I will. I miss my home so much." I looked down at my shoes.

"We all do, but it helps to meet others who are in the same boat. Make sure you visit us."

"I will. Remember how we cleaned Adam's floor after the dance party?" I laughed and shifted in my seat.

"Do I ever," he said and grinned. I felt warm waves of a positive life force emanating from Paul, but I wondered where Adam was and I didn't even want to ask about him for fear of becoming terribly upset.

Paul left after an hour and we promised to keep in touch.

Greta arrived at our home on a sunny day in February. This was an enchanted time here because the sun dispelled the gloom for about 10 days in the middle of the month and one could feel optimistic again.

She looked radiant and effervescent. She was to stay with her Estonian boyfriend for a few weeks. "He must be the one who told Paul about me. He's a medical student, isn't he?" I asked her.

"Yes! That's him. I like him very much, but we're too much alike. He's just as persistent and strong-willed as I am." We both laughed. "I wish my American boyfriend would propose because he's a mild type and always lets me be the boss when we go out."

"Make sure you let me know what happens," I said as I passed a tea cup and a pastry over to her.

"Definitely. And you? How is life treating you?" She arched her eyebrows and smiled expectantly.

"Not too bad. George is terribly busy at work and I stay busy looking after him and Karin, but his mother is a venomous snake. She keeps sending poisonous letters from Athens and George doesn't speak to me for three days after he reads them." I grabbed a table napkin and blew my nose and my throat constricted.

Greta reached out and held my arm fervently. "Fight back and never give up." Her warm and strong, charismatic personality helped to console me and give me courage. "There's a limit to how long her power can last from so far away."

"I hope you're right." I blew my nose again.

Greta left soon because she was anxious to drive to the country with her boyfriend.

It was January of 1955 and the freezing rain was so persistent and so heavy that rivers of muddy water swept down the street in front of our apartment and beads of moisture formed on the inside panes of our windows and I had to keep wiping them away.

Karin was always coughing, sneezing and nearly choking on yellowish green mucus. I put pots of boiling menthol ointment in her room so she could breathe a little at night and I washed the walls with antiseptics frequently. I woke up every hour to go and check on her and our whole apartment smelled like a hospital.

I took her to our family doctor in downtown Vancouver. He examined her carefully and frowned. "She's going to get tuberculosis unless something drastic is done. She has spots in the lungs. The X-rays show them clearly." He spoke with unwavering finality.

"Oh, no!" My eyes widened with fear. This was one of the best doctors in the city. What would I do now?

"You have relatives in Greece, don't you?"

"My in-laws, yes," I whispered.

"Send her there for a while. The hot and dry climate might help her. I can talk to George if you like." He took his stethoscope off, placed it on the desk and put his hand on the phone.

"You can call him later. He's giving lectures right now." I could hardly speak and I remembered the white coffin Father ordered for me when I had double pneumonia. I loved Karin so much I couldn't imagine ordering a coffin for her now. But what was the alternative? Sending her right into Elektra's tentacles so that she could plot to take her away from me?

I went home and discussed the problem with George when he returned from work and he agreed with the doctor and decided to

send me and Karin to Athens in the early fall. I wanted to go with her to make sure she would not be abused or kept in Athens against my will and I also hoped to reach out to Elektra to try to improve our relationship. Maybe she would warm up to me if she had a chance to get to know me.

It would take some time to save the money for a long trip like this and I admired George for having the family loyalty it took to sacrifice on a daily basis. Even though his salary was still low, he sent a good part of his paycheck to his parents in gratitude for everything they did for him and he also tried his best to look after Karin and me. I personally thought it was terribly unfair of his parents to expect such a sacrifice and his younger brother also sent a good deal of his salary to his parents even though they owned a lot of property.

It was a crisp September day and I stood at the bus stop close to our apartment. I wanted to go downtown and buy some cheap clothes from the large bargain stores because we were to leave for Greece in October.

A middle-aged woman with pale blue eyes and blond hair walked over to the bus stop and stood beside me. She looked Eastern European. "Where are you from?" I smiled at her.

"East Germany," she said and smiled cautiously.

I told her I was from Estonia and we shook hands. "Have you ever been able to connect with home since you left?" I looked at her eagerly.

"Not until now, but the Red Cross just managed to connect me with some long-lost relatives last week." Her smiled broadened.

"Really? Please tell me more." I was very excited and prepared to change my bus route if necessary.

"Call the Red Cross and see what they can do for you. Letters are beginning to trickle through from behind the Iron Curtain."

"Have you heard anything about travelling there?"

"The East Bloc is still out of bounds for us, unfortunately." She cringed and bit her lip a little.

"Yes. And I know it's impossible to phone," I said as we stared at each other with the same look of bitter pain.

The bus arrived and we got on together and sat next to each other. We continued talking until we parted on a downtown street.

When I came home I immediately phoned the Red Cross and spoke with a friendly representative who assured me that she would do everything possible to deliver a letter to Estonia.

As soon as I closed the phone I wrote a letter to Lara because she was the least political of all the family members and was therefore probably the safest person to contact. I could only write about neutral subjects, if I wrote too much we could all be in trouble because spies scrutinized everything. I had to protect them. But I was so excited I could hardly keep the pen steady.

George came home for supper and put his bulging briefcase down on the grey couch. "Hello! How are you?" He kissed me and smiled. "I gave very successful lectures today. Many of the students stayed behind after the lectures to tell me they plan to give me the Best Lecturer cup this year." He poured himself a finger of whiskey. "Would you like some?" He looked at me and arched his eyebrows.

"Yes! I have lemons and I'll make whiskey sours." I ran to the kitchen and returned with the doctored drinks.

"Mmmm!" He smacked his lips. Then he glanced at my letter. "What are you writing?"

"A letter to my sister Lara. The Red Cross says it might be able to deliver it." I was thrilled.

"You are writing to the Soviet Union? Oh, my God." He put his head in his hands and rolled his eyes. "Spies watch scientists very closely, and if they find this letter they may think that I am a communist and I may be fired. This is all I need now. You have no idea how dangerous this is." He paced back and forth quickly and waved his arms.

"I have no idea?" I laughed. "You have no idea what real danger means. Let the spies face me and talk to me about communism. Anyway, I am giving your mother's address to Lara so that she can reply to me there." He looked relieved and began to calm down. "If I send the letter now I may get an answer before we return to Vancouver. After all, we're staying there for a whole year."

"That's true," he said and sat down to read the newspaper. I was glad he had a distraction now.

Rustling sounds were coming from the kitchen, so I walked over there and saw Karin sitting on a floor completely littered with rectangular pieces of newspaper. "What are you doing?"

"Making money for our trip to Greece because I keep hearing you and Daddy talk about how expensive it is." She looked down at her right hand. "The scissors are making marks on my hand, Mommy. It hurts." She was cheerful anyway and she amused me with her slightly cross-eyed expression and partly toothless grin.

I laughed. "You're such a funny, crazy kid." I patted her on the head and thought about our trip. We would take the train to New York and then an ocean liner from New York to Athens. What was going to happen there? In any case I had to remain strong.

Chapter Twelve

It was the middle of October, 1955 and Elektra and Evangelos were waiting at the dock in Pireaus. Evangelos wore a dark, casual suit and Elektra wore black patent pumps, a bright canary yellow suit and matching small hat.

As we approached them they both smiled and waved. Evangelos offered his hand to me and said, "Welcome to Greece." His expression was still philosophical, kind and noble and he shook Karin's hand warmly.

Elektra just nodded at me and then swept Karin up into her arms, smothering her with kisses and showering her with what sounded like endearing Greek words. Evangelos translated: "She calls her 'my sweet child'." I noticed the endearing crinkles around his eyes and I still felt that he was very sympathetic toward me. I was glad Elektra seemed to like Karin; that was the most important thing and I hoped our visit here really would help her health.

Evangelos drove us in his American jeep station wagon out of Pireaus and toward Athens. I expected to see the tall, blonde people I learned about in high school history classes, but was amazed to see mainly short and dark people and I looked for the magnificent classical temples on wide boulevards and only saw dilapidated buildings that were crouched on very narrow, crooked streets. Donkeys carried heavy loads and were just as numerous as the cars.

The purplish blue sea and the brilliant sunshine were enchanting, however, and I enjoyed the strong, salty smell that wafted over

to us as we cruised along a seaside highway. It was very warm and dry, so I removed my coat.

After about an hour and a half we reached an impressive neighborhood that was graced by aristocratic stone villas and palm trees. "We are very close to our house now," Evangelos said. No wonder Elektra acted so confident. I wondered what her house really looked like.

We soon stopped in front of an imposing three floor white stone villa and Evangelos got out to open the large, lemon-yellow wrought-iron gates that guarded the entrance to the driveway. I stared at the long and wide white marble stairway that led up to the front door of the villa, an enormous, arched yellow wrought-iron door protected the thick glass door that was right behind it. Some of the windows led out onto balconies that had yellow iron balustrades and all the windows had yellow wooden shutters. Jasmine plants were entwined around the two large first floor balconies, palm trees thrived on either side of the house and the front garden had rose bushes surrounded by crushed white marble.

We entered through the imposing front door into a large, wood paneled round hall and then went through another glass door and entered the enormous main hall. I stared in disbelief, the ceiling was three times the height of the one in our Vancouver apartment and was decorated in Byzantine style, the walls were covered with thick, silvery interlocking tiles and doorless Arabian style archways led to several interconnected living rooms on either side of the grand entrance hall. I thought of pictures of the Alhambra and the Taj Mahal.

The hall had a richly patterned marble floor and the living room floors to the right were covered with thick burgundy and royal blue Persian rugs. There was a lot of dark, hand-carved antique furniture with mother-of-pearl inlay spread throughout the rooms and a winding, white marble staircase led up to the second floor.

Elektra shouted at two servant girls who rushed to meet her. They grabbed our valises and started running upstairs with them. Then I thought of how we lived in Vancouver and shook my head slowly. I had to tear up old bed sheets for Karin's diapers so that

George could send money here? In a moment of weakness he told me that Elektra threatened to persuade Evangelos to disinherit him if he did not oblige. Had she no shame or pity?

Right after dinner I gave Elektra a little package of perfumed soaps. "This is from me and Karin," I said. She squinted at the package as if trying to read the label, held it up to her nose and smiled wanly.

"Thank you," she said condescendingly as she threw the soaps into her bulging purse and turned away from me to shout at the servants. I felt embarrassed about the cheap present, but it was all I could afford.

The day after we arrived, Elektra walked into my bedroom in the evening and said, "You should be in the kitchen by seven in the morning to help the servants with food preparations. Tomatoes must be peeled, spinach must be chopped, dough for phyllo must be flattened and mincemeat must be cooked. You will begin to learn traditional Greek cooking so that my son does not starve. Have you ever used a washboard?" She smiled wryly.

"No."

"My servants will show you all these things. Goodnight." I heard the click-clack of her heels as she crossed the large round hall to get back to her own bedroom. The second floor was not nearly as impressive as the main floor and the third floor seemed to be locked.

By December I learned the basics of the complex Greek cuisine and even began to learn some kitchen Greek from the servants. Evangelos spent quite a bit of time in the kitchen because he loved cooking and often translated what the servants said. I was so grateful that he continued to be friendly to me and to Karin. This helped me endure the cold and tyrannical Elektra, who made sure I worked hard most of the day. I was always happy when she went to her dermatology clinic in downtown Athens, where she sold her own line of cosmetics.

One of the servants was an older lady who always arrived at seven in the morning and was invariably dressed in black. I used sign language and a few Greek words to ask her why she was always

dressed in black and she replied, "Mavro exo, mavro mesa" and also used sign language to clarify her words.

Evangelos laughed and said, "She means that she wears black outside because she feels funereally sad, or black, inside."

Then she held her jaw with her hands and grimaced. "What is it?" I tried to ask her. She pointed toward a gold tooth, she must have had a toothache. Evangelos confirmed this, so I got some aspirin from my purse and gave it to her. She seemed to be extremely grateful and she ran to the sink, filled a glass with water and swallowed the aspirin. Then she rushed over to me and hugged me and I felt a special bond with her because of her gallows humor.

The weather was colder now, but it was still sunny and dry and Karin was not as chronically ill as she was in Vancouver. There seemed to be some hope for her health. I also enjoyed the brilliant sun whenever I could get out of the kitchen. At least Karin could play outside with the dogs and the cats as long as she wanted and the back garden was huge and full of citrus trees with shiny, waxy leaves.

One morning I arrived in the kitchen to find Elektra there already, sitting in front of the long marble work table and examining a pile of clothes that were ready for ironing. Two irons were plugged into the wall behind her and she gave me a half smile and looked coy. "Let's see who can iron faster and better," she said softly and looked directly at me. She looked me up and down carefully as if studying my whole body for possible flaws and then motioned toward the iron next to her.

"All right," I said as I walked over to my work station. We both stood and began ironing with furious energy and after about half an hour I saw rivulets of sweat running down her face. She left her iron for a few seconds and took deep breaths while I kept ironing. The three servants stopped their work to stare at us. Elektra picked up her iron again and continued at a fast pace and I did not slow down at all.

After another 20 minutes or so, she sat down, sighed, and wiped her sweat away with a towel from the laundry pile. I kept ironing, and it was obvious that I won the contest.

She stood up slowly and smiled a little. "If you want to live with my son, you are going to have to learn to live with me. I am the most important woman in his life," she said softly and distinctly. This was her way of winning the contest, she obviously couldn't face defeat of any kind.

I wanted so much to talk to Evangelos, but he left at four in the morning to go to his hobby farm, which was about 20 kilometers northeast of the city. He sometimes returned around ten in the morning and I hoped he would return soon.

Two days after the ironing contest, Elektra developed serious eye trouble and had to go to the hospital, she stayed there for a week, but Evangelos did not elaborate on the problem.

When she returned home, she wore black sunshades that had tiny holes in the middle; she had to wear these for at least three weeks and couldn't work in her clinic.

Soon after she returned, an orthodox priest wearing a stiff and tall black hat and long, flowing black robes visited the villa and moved from room to room with an incense burner and a large ornate crucifix. He mumbled incessantly in what I was told was Byzantine Greek and the whole house smelled like the little neighborhood church Evangelos took me to occasionally.

I also saw Elektra wearing a new, short pendant made of about a dozen sky blue beads. When I asked Evangelos about the beads, he said, "People who have blue eyes in Greece are supposed to have the power to cast the 'evil eye'. Blue beads are supposed to protect you from it."

I often saw the servants crossing themselves when I appeared in a room and now the complete picture began to emerge. Elektra blamed me and my 'evil eye' for her eye trouble and even had the servants frightened of me. Suddenly she didn't seem to be so powerful. Is this all it took to scare her? A poor, blue-grey-eyed refugee like me? Then the whole household deserved to be scared. Mother was right, I had to fight. I felt stronger and more determined than ever now.

I went to the plain, dusty bedroom I shared with Karin at night (the servants cleaned every room in the villa except that one) and

prayed to whatever power was running the universe that the year would pass quickly and that Lara would write soon. Would I ever hear from her? Did she receive my letter? Was she alive?

It was a bright and warm, sunny day in early February of 1956 and I sat on the steps of the side entrance next to the driveway and closed my eyes and faced the sun. Karin, who was almost five years old now, tried to train an adorable little black and white puppy to fetch her ball. She giggled with delight and amused herself for hours. The puppy was an obedient student and Karin hugged and stroked her frequently.

Now the servant who always wore black and didn't cross herself anymore when she saw me walked down the steps and handed me a letter. I assumed it was from George, he was probably complaining about loneliness and how difficult it was to look after himself for so long.

The envelope had an unusually square shape and the sun temporarily blinded me, so I used my hand as a shade to study it on the front and on the back. My whole body trembled.

Karin rushed over to me and said, "What's the matter, Mommy?" She held the squirming puppy in her arms.

"Please go and play with the animals, Karin. I can't talk right now. Please!"

"Yes, Mommy." She ran off to the back yard with the puppy and called out to one of the kittens.

With unsteady hands, I tore the envelope open and saw Lara's handwriting. I read quickly and found out that my family were amazed to hear that I was still alive, that my parents were still living mainly at the country house on the estate, and that Lara was still married to Harald and had a 10-year-old son. Aunt Lara was still alive, but there was no mention of my beloved brother Albert. I wondered why. Where was he?

I would write back to my family immediately and never lose contact with them again. I was overjoyed to know that most of them were alive and not in Siberia. But Albert? That worried me very much. This coming August it would be 12 years since I left the Tallinn

harbor and embarked upon a ceaseless and perilous adventure. How long would it be before I could actually see my family again?

In the evening I started another letter to Lara and gave her Evald's address in Sweden. I told her that I would write to him and that she should also, hoping that she would understand that Evald would act as a secretary and supply new envelopes for our letters. George would have been put on a blacklist if any letters directly from the Soviet Union came to Vancouver, and Lara would have been put under close surveillance by the spy networks if she received letters from the West. Receiving a letter from Sweden was politically safe for all of us.

I also wrote to Evald and informed him of my plans. Paul and the other Estonians in Vancouver assured me that all letters to and from the U.S.S.R. were steamed open in Soviet post offices to make sure that no 'sensitive material' was exchanged. Letters with political or scientific comments were seized.

Evangelos accompanied me to the main post office in downtown Athens and mailed both letters at the wicket of the chief clerk. He told me that there were many communists in Greece, so the Soviets didn't worry so much about mail from here. He also told me he sincerely hoped my letters would go through and I thanked him and shook his hand.

Later on in the evening, after Elektra went upstairs to bed, Evangelos and I sat down in the smaller, informal dining room close to the kitchen to play cards and drink some of the white wine he made on his hobby farm. The wine had a rich, aromatic grape flavor and a dark golden color and had twice the alcohol content of regular wine. I sipped it slowly and savored every molecule.

As he passed out the cards I thought about what a fantastic man he was and that he probably went to his farm so often in order to escape Elektra's clutches. He was apparently 15 years older than she was and he seemed to prefer peace and nature to family disputes.

We visited the farm in April to celebrate Greek Easter. It was located at the foothills of Mount Pendeli. Before we drove up the

long driveway to the country house, Evangelos pointed toward the mountain and said, "Most of the marble that was used to build the Parthenon was extricated from there."

"Really?" I stared at the high pine-covered mountain.

"Yes. And when Greece had a civil war after the Second World War, I was arrested by communists and taken high up there. They were ready to shoot me, but some men recognized me and told the commanders that I am a kind doctor who often helps poor people by performing operations for nothing. They let me go, and it took me two days to walk down the mountain." He grinned.

We drove up the driveway and he pointed to the hundreds of grape vines that covered the gentle hill leading up to the house. "During the Second World War, my own son saw a German soldier helping himself to some of our grapes by the road and he jumped at his throat and made him drop the grapes. Two minutes later a military truck arrived and took my son away. George found out where he was taken, rushed over to the commander of the prison camp, spoke flawless German to him, and managed to convince him that my son is slightly retarded and is not responsible for his actions. This isn't true, of course, but the commander believed him and let my son go." I was very proud of George's courageous and loyal behavior. I would not let Elektra ruin our marriage.

I marveled at the grape vines; many of them were much taller than I was. I looked at the other side of the driveway. "What are those other trees?"

"Pistachio trees. I sell grapes, wine and pistachios to the best restaurants in Athens. I love my retirement because I can spend so much time here." He made a sweeping gesture with his arm. I liked this farm very much myself. The pristine mountain air rejuvenated me and the trees comforted me and I remembered the joy I always felt at our own estate back home.

We approached the charming stone house at the top of the hill and I was amused to hear a donkey braying in the distance. The pine trees close to the house sent over a tantalizing aroma of resin and sun-warmed needles.

We entered the house and I was impressed by the cozy stone fireplace with a long mantelpiece decorated with large dolls dressed in traditional folk costumes. A servant who came along with us wound up the record player and put on some rousing folk music and I almost expected the dolls to dance on the mantelpiece. "We don't have electricity, but there are plenty of kerosene lamps for the evening," Evangelos said.

Elektra smiled at me and said, "How do you like my little country house?"

"Very much. I like the whole farm very much." I smiled at her and she nodded with pleasure.

"I want to show you something," she said as she led me outside. She pointed to a stone stairway leading up to the second floor. "During the Nazi occupation, we had a general housed in our Athens villa, but I still had the courage to hide an entire Jewish family up there. There is a little bathroom that leads to a secluded attic through a secret door." She looked triumphant.

"What happened to the family?" I was incredulous.

"They were eventually smuggled out to an island in a fishing boat. The Nazis never found out and the family visited me a few years ago and thanked me for saving them."

"Congratulations. That is a tremendous achievement," I said and she smiled at me. Even Elektra had a soft heart toward some people. Maybe I could warm up to her after all, maybe she would accept me, trust me and stop antagonizing me. I thought I should try to be nicer to her again. There was hope.

For Easter, the next day, Evangelos began roasting a small lamb on a spit that was in a pit close to the house and beside an outdoor brick bread oven. Karin and I took turns turning the spit and I enjoyed the crackling sounds, the smoky fire, the intense heat and the smell of freshly carbonized meat.

I noticed some pretty violet and white wildflowers close to the pit and went to pick them up. I gave the little bouquet to Elektra, she smiled, smelled them and thanked me absentmindedly. I looked at her wistfully and hoped that this gesture would help to bring us a little closer.

One afternoon in May, just after Karin's fifth birthday, one of George's paternal aunts came to the villa in Athens for a visit. Elektra was furious, but the aunt was so anxious to see Karin that she insisted on coming in. Elektra obviously didn't want me to be alone with the aunt and I wondered why.

The lady was one of George's biological father's sisters. She was very dignified, had kind mannerisms and wore elegant clothes. I liked her and wished I could be alone with her even for a few minutes. We spoke in French and she gave Karin a huge, beautiful doll dressed in blue satin clothes. The child squealed with delight.

Then the phone rang and Elektra picked it up. She forgot about us and started speaking vivaciously, the aunt and I took advantage of this opportunity and moved to another room.

She shook her head slowly from side to side and her expression became very grave. "George's father was not killed by the Turks," she whispered. What? George told me he was. "He shot himself at the front when he found out that Elektra was having an affair with Evangelos." My mouth sagged. No wonder she didn't want us to be alone. "Evangelos married her because he felt guilty. I must admit, though, that he did bring George up as if he were his own son."

"Thank you for telling me this. It explains a lot of things," I whispered.

"I hope you can stand living in this house. Is she very cruel?" She looked concerned.

"Mostly, but there are days when she can be nice."We both looked toward the phone.

"Good luck," she said and patted me on the shoulder.

Elektra obviously got some good news over the phone. She didn't pay much attention to us even after the conversation was over.

The aunt and I walked toward the front door. "Goodbye," she said as she passed me a small piece of paper with her address and phone just before she walked down the white marble steps. "Call me anytime."

George arrived at the villa one morning early in July for a vacation, and as soon as he made his grand entrance through the imposing front door, the servants scurried around him and picked up his valises.

Elektra, dressed in a gold brocade dress and gold pumps, trotted across the marble floor and greeted him as if he were a long-lost lover. She hugged and kissed him passionately and gazed at him with star-struck eyes. I found the obvious sexuality of her behavior repulsive. What was going on? Mother never groped at Albert like that.

When Elektra finally released George for a few seconds, he nodded at me and asked, "How are you?"

"Not too bad," I said. Karin ran over to him for a hug, but I stood still because I was still overcome with revulsion. I began to suspect that one of the reasons Elektra had so much power over George was because she took advantage of his deep vulnerability after his own father's death. She, being the only natural parent, was in a position to exercise emotional abuse. How I wished I could discuss this situation with Mother and Lara. I couldn't trust anyone else.

In early August, George took Karin and me to the island of Santorini. Elektra was furious that she was not invited, and I was happy about that.

We all enjoyed the island immensely and George was very nice to me and Karin. I sometimes sat on the hotel veranda and gazed at the stark, volcanic landscape and Homer's wine-dark sea. I was moved enough to write some poetry and George told me he was very happy that his homeland inspired me so much.

One evening I confronted him about Elektra's overtly sexual behavior toward him, but he insisted that most Mediterranean mothers were fiercely attached to their sons and that I didn't understand this because I came from such a different culture.

We returned to Athens two weeks later and Elektra was still furious and tried to make us feel guilty about leaving her behind.

George soon left Athens to fly back to Vancouver. I wished so much I could have taken Karin and gone with him, but we had to take the boat and our tickets were made out for the end of October. It would have cost a fortune to change everything and we didn't have that kind of money.

The evening after George left, I went to Elektra's bedroom to say goodnight to her. She was dressed in a pink satin nightdress, smelled of sweat and rose powder, and stood next to her bed. She flashed a reptilian smile at me and slowly walked over to me. "Remember, I am the most important woman in George's life." She laughed a little and stared right into my eyes. "I found out that you were already married to someone else when you married my son. I will annul your marriage to him."

I felt Mother's spirit fusing with mine and I pushed Elektra away from me with great force. She fell onto her bed and shrieked.

Evangelos burst into the room. "What is going on?" He looked alarmed.

"Your wife is an evil and cruel woman," I told him. Then I looked directly at Elektra. "My mother told me that evil people who are cruel to innocent people never get away without being punished. You will be punished one day. I curse you. You will become blind." My voice did not waver at all.

They both gasped sharply and I stormed out of the room.

Elektra was much more possessive of her son than any Mediterranean mother would have been. She wanted him all for herself and would have never accepted any daughter-in-law, even a rich Greek woman would have been rejected. I was sure of that.

Evangelos drove Karin and me to the harbor on the day of our departure and I was glad Elektra stayed at home.

Goodbye, white marble prison, I thought as the boat pulled away from the dock. That was the hardest year of my life.

Chapter Thirteen

Karin and I stopped for a couple of days in New York City on the way back to Vancouver and visited Inge and Wanda, who were delighted to see us.

Wanda told me that the Soviets were still capable of sending innocent Estonians and others to Siberian labor camps and that the Red Cross could do nothing about it. When would the carnage stop?

Soon after we returned to Vancouver, George informed us that he decided to rent a small, grey stucco house that was close to the beach and only about 30 minutes by car from the university. He also bought a used, but good light blue 1955 Chevrolet which I enjoyed driving very much.

The house had tiny rooms with hardwood floors and our furniture was very ordinary, but I enjoyed the privacy and the garden and was happy that Karin had much more room to play. I couldn't wait until George had enough money to buy a house and I hoped he would stop yielding to his mother's blackmail tactics and stop sending so much money to her.

Karin started grade one in September of 1957 at the red brick school house just a few blocks from our house. She loved school, loved to read and was always cheerful even when she coughed and spat up all that greenish yellow mucus. But she couldn't sleep much at night and I felt so sorry for her.

Our family doctor told us the same thing again. "She will get tuberculosis the way she's going, the spots in the lungs have re-

turned. You may have to send her back to Greece. If you don't, she will be an invalid for the rest of her short life."

George decided that the best thing to do would be to wait until she finished first grade and then to send her to Athens for a while. I couldn't bear living with Elektra, so Karin would have to go by herself this time. I dreaded having to part with her and sending her to the 'marble prison', but I had no choice. But what would I do if Elektra would try to keep her there? I didn't have any money and couldn't afford a lawyer. But no Canadian lawyer would be able to control events in Greece anyway. What a predicament.

One torrentially wet afternoon in October, 1957 I received a bulky letter from Estonia via Sweden. A black cross was drawn in the upper left corner of the envelope. I cringed.

I sat on the couch in the living room and drank some vodka because I dreaded opening the letter, my hands trembled as I drank more vodka and coughed nervously.

When I finally opened it I found a letter from Lara and some pictures.

After I finished reading the letter, tears fell on it and blurred some of the ink. I could hardly breathe and Karin ran over to me and said, "What's the matter, Mum?" She smiled at me.

I whispered, "My father died. He fell to the floor after having a heart attack." I gulped and the lump in my throat was very painful and almost choking me. "The last thing he said was: 'Sonya!'" I whimpered like a wounded animal now.

Karin hugged me gently and said, "Aw, Mum. I'm sorry, Mum. Don't cry, Mum. Please don't cry." My tears flowed in heavier and heavier streams and my nose ran also. Karin ran to the kitchen and brought me a lot of paper napkins. "Here, Mum." I blew my nose and wiped my eyes.

Karin examined the pictures and pointed to the one that showed Father lying in his coffin. "Is that your Daddy?"

"Yes," I whispered.

"Why couldn't I ever meet my other grandpa?" She frowned.

"I'll tell you some other time. It's too difficult to explain now," I said as I wiped my eyes.

"Who's this man?" She pointed to Albert, who stood beside Father's grave close to the estate.

"It's my brother, your uncle Albert," I said quietly. As tragic as Father's death was, at least I finally found out through a picture that my beloved brother was alive and still looked handsome. Evald wrote to me that he thought Albert was in Siberia for several years. No wonder he never wrote to me and Lara never mentioned him, he was scared of the spies. But he was alive and at home now. I studied his face for signs of suffering and tried to communicate compassion to him. When would I see him again?

I looked at Mother's face: she looked so sad, but that indomitable strength was still there. I tried to send love to her. Would she feel it?

Karin was put on a plane in June and the stewardesses were to look after her and make sure she arrived in Athens. I walked on the plane to say goodbye to her and she was already amusing herself with books and toys and seemed to look forward to the trip.

When I got back from the airport I called one of my good friends and went to visit her at her house not too far from the university. She was from Madrid and had to leave Spain when the civil war erupted. She went to France first and then to Mexico, where she met and married an eccentric Canadian professor who brought her to Vancouver and then tried to strangle her.

In spite of her difficult life as a refugee and her impossible marriage, she had a vivacious and courageous spirit and often made me explode with laughter because she was an incomparable mime and had a gift for seeing the funny side of just about anything. We had a mutually satisfying and strong bond.

In July, George and I moved back to the UBC campus area so that he could be close enough to walk to work again. I didn't mind because our first floor apartment was in an elegant three floor aristocratic building and was very spacious and airy. I used the meager pocket money George gave me to buy better furniture.

The university administration made it painfully clear that I was not able to help George in the lab anymore, so I had to find other pursuits to keep me as busy as possible during Karin's absence.

I bought self teaching books, canvasses, oil paints and brushes and set up a mini studio in the dining room. I drew landscapes and still life scenes and then applied the oil paints and I enjoyed the challenge immensely and looked forward to taking evening classes at the university from professional painters.

I took a few evening classes to improve my English and bought a lot of books. I especially enjoyed great literature like the novels of Hemingway and biographies.

I experimented with various cooking styles and created some original dishes. I learned the basics of Scandinavian, German, Russian, and Canadian cooking and George allowed himself the luxury of good food and appreciated my attempts to make it. He loved my Greek dishes.

Most of my friends did not drive, so I enjoyed taking them on errands and helping them with their shopping. My Spanish friend was getting a divorce from her eccentric professor husband and was very grateful to me for helping her move from one apartment to another. I felt very sorry for her because in our academic circle divorce had a pungent stigma attached to it and she was terribly short of money because the laws were made for men and divorced women were at a frightful disadvantage. I couldn't imagine living like that now.

I often wrote letters to Karin and sent her books so that she could keep up her English. She was enrolled in a Greek school and had to struggle to learn that language. I kept hoping that I would hear from her soon. Why didn't she answer my letters? Why didn't Elektra write to us or phone us to inform us about Karin's health and progress at school?

Karin was in Athens for one year now and I didn't know much about her life there. George just told me she was fine and should stay there for another year so that her recovery would be complete. He called Elektra from his office occasionally.

I was furious with Elektra as usual, but there was nothing I could do. It wouldn't have surprised me if she just threw Karin's replies away before they ever made it to the post office.

George's brother gave up his good job as a shipping agent in Vancouver and went back to Athens to look after his parents because he was also blackmailed with the disinheritance story and he was too busy to think about Karin's letters to me. I was sure of that.

It was early July, 1960 and George went to Greece to bring Karin back after an absence of two years. Elektra didn't want to let her go, but I insisted on having her back and luckily he listened to me.

When I finally saw Karin at the airport I had a hard time holding back my tears because she looked horrible and had not grown an inch, her hair looked as if a rodent had chewed on it, many of her teeth were loose and yellowish brown and she was severely bow-legged. I had taken such great care with her appearance and now she was unrecognizable. How was I going to reverse this awful damage?

When we arrived at the apartment, she stretched her arms out to me pitifully and said, "I missed you so much, Mum. Can I stay in your bed tonight?"

"Of course," I said and winced.

The next day I took her to our family doctor and he confirmed that her lungs were out of danger and I was greatly relieved, but I had to work on improving her appearance before she would start fourth grade in September.

Gradually, Karin began to tell me about her life with Elektra. "Grandma always said bad things about you, Mum, and even the servants told me that you are not a good mother. I always told them to shut up." She pouted and hugged me.

"What time did you get to bed at night?"

"Oh, one in the morning. I stayed with Grandma in her cosmetics clinic until midnight and then we went home. And I had to get up at seven to go to school even on Saturdays."

"What did you eat?" I looked at her teeth.

"A lot of chocolate bars. Can I have one now?" She looked at me eagerly and I cringed.

"Not now." I looked at her narrow, pointed-toe shoes. "Don't these pinch you?"

"Yes. But Grandma told me that tiny feet are beautiful. She always made me wear shoes that were too small for me." No wonder she was bow-legged and her big toes were curved inwards. This reminded me of Chinese foot-binding. Elektra claimed to be a dermatologist, but what kind of a doctor would have allowed a child to deteriorate like this? I would have to work very hard to reverse the damage. What if some of it was permanent? That damned Elektra, I could have killed her.

I convinced George to give me enough money so that I could take Karin to the Okanagan region and stay in a reasonable hotel by Osoyoos Lake. George and I drove there quite often when Karin was in Greece and enjoyed the desert-like hot, dry air, warm, low sagebrush-covered hills and gleaming lakes and sprawling orchards.

I gave Karin a proper haircut, bought her bigger shoes, put plastic wedges between her toes and started feeding her three nutritious meals every day because I was determined to reverse the damage of two years of living in an insane household.

Karin loved the Okanagan so much she didn't want to return to Vancouver. She swam in the lake for hours and went down the metal slide with the other kids so often that her bathing suit became threadbare.

At the end of the summer she looked much better than she did at the airport.

Karin hated fourth grade. She went to a small school about 10 blocks away from our apartment. The other students were mainly children of professionals and rich entrepreneurs who lived in the exclusive part of the university endowment lands.

She came home every day and begged me not to make her go back to school and said the others made fun of her appearance and her Greek name and teased her for not speaking perfect English.

One boy pushed her off her bike and I found out where he lived and gave him hell. His mother spanked him in front of me and Karin.

I hoped Karin would adjust to her environment soon.

Chapter Fourteen

Karin's culture shock slowly dissipated and she made some friends at school and enjoyed grades five and six more than grade four.

For grade seven she went to the high school building which was only four blocks away from our apartment and she liked the new environment very much. She performed well academically, and even though she had many winter colds and flus, the danger of permanent lung damage seemed to be gone.

George was a full professor now and his teaching load was lighter, so he could spend more and more time doing research. His salary was good, but he continued to send too much money to his parents because they were heavily in debt and he felt that it was his duty to save them from financial ruin. He urged them to rent out the villa to an embassy, but Elektra refused. Her cosmetics business certainly didn't provide enough money for them to survive and Evangelos didn't have a large pension. I believed strongly in fulfilling one's obligations in life, but George was simply being used and abused. His parents could have sold some land and bought an apartment block, but they couldn't bear to part with any property.

In January of 1964, while Karin was in grade seven I received a letter from Lara telling me that Mother had spent Christmas alone at the country estate and was sitting beside a window when most of the house collapsed under the weight of the snow. The only part of the house that did not collapse was the wall right next to her.

She crawled out of the window and trudged through the snow for a long time until she arrived at a neighbor's house and contacted Albert.

Mother had to move in with Albert, his wife and three children in a smaller house in the outskirts of Tallinn because no one had the money to re-build the country home and there was a shortage of building materials in the country. She did not like this arrangement at all and wanted desperately to move back to the countryside.

I put the letter down and moaned with grief. How I wished I could have flown to Mother immediately to help to look after her. She was 76 years old and Lara often took the bus from Tallinn to Albert's house to give her courage and bring her presents. She was a strong 76, but she needed more attention now.

I hoped Mother could visit Helsinki for a while and that I could fly there and meet her. Travelling to the Soviet Union was still out of the question, but what about meeting in Helsinki? I hadn't seen mother for almost 20 years, but her courageous spirit still helped me to survive my own ordeals and I had to see her soon. She needed me now and it was about time I gave something back to her in gratitude for everything she had done for me.

I wrote to Lara and told her of my plan to meet Mother in Finland. They would have to apply for a visitor's visa for her.

Three weeks later I got a reply from Lara. The Soviets refused to give a visa to Mother because she was considered to be a "security risk" and she was heartbroken because she desperately wanted to see me. I couldn't accept the decision of the heartless bureaucrats and I would try again soon.

Lara also wrote that Adam landed in Russia as a Finnish paratrooper during the war and eventually married a Russian woman. He brought her to Estonia, had a daughter with her, divorced her and married a local woman.

One day he got totally stoned, took a taxi up to the Toompea in the old town, walked into the government building and told a prominent communist official to go to hell and to put his head in his ass. Adam was not arrested because the official was an old high school friend and actually felt sorry for him.

He then took a taxi and visited my sister and her husband, apparently he did this quite often and always asked about me. Lara said he was a real nuisance, was in poor health and smoked incessantly. Would my life have been better if he would not have deserted? I wondered. He seemed to be so incredibly unstable, he was too rich too soon and too spoiled.

I folded the letter and stored it in a desk drawer. I had to go for a drive to wipe away the oppressive and gloomy vibrations that were hovering around me.

I drove to Stanley Park and walked into the forest. I stared at the gigantic trees that dripped with moss, the aroma of ancient wood, wet needles and cedar berries engulfed me and the total silence soothed me. Occasionally I heard a few drops of water falling on leaves, the mournful cries of a peacock pierced the air.

Then I walked out of the forest and continued over to the small zoo, where otters ran up and down their concrete ramp and jumped off the top into the water, their playfulness amused me. An emu stood under a big tree so that it wouldn't get wet and an adorable wallaby sat under the emu and then I found myself smiling in spite of everything.

It was an early August morning now and George was in Greece visiting his family and childhood friends who returned there after many years of living in the States. His very best friend became a minister in his father's government and aimed to become prime minister himself one day.

Karin and I sat in our beloved '55 Chev in front of the apartment and perused our checklist to make sure everything was done before we left for the Okanagan.

Suddenly I felt a wave of apprehension surge through my body. "We must wait for the postman before we leave," I said to Karin.

"Why?"

"Because he is going to bring us an important letter from Greece. I can feel it," I said softly.

"All right," she said patiently. Soon she pointed at a man who approached the car. "There he is."

He saw us also and delivered our mail personally. "Here you are," he said and smiled. "A letter from Greece."

I opened it quickly and read it. After a minute I dropped it on the seat and whispered, "Oh, no. Oh, no."

"What is it, Mum? What is it?" Karin looked anxious.

"Grandpa just died of a heart attack, Dad tried to resuscitate him after he had his first attack and it worked for a couple or hours, but then he had another massive attack and that finished him."

"Oh, no. Grandpa was so nice." A few large tears spilled down Karin's cheeks.

"I know, I liked him very much." This was terrible news. Not only was it unbearably sad, it was also very dangerous. Now that Evangelos was dead and Elektra owned the Athens villa, the country house and the farm, she was going to become more tyrannical and venomous. I had no doubt that she would blackmail George with greater intensity.

In the summer of 1965 we all went to Greece for holidays. I didn't want to see Elektra, but I thought I could stand her for a couple of months in order to absorb some sun and dry heat.

Elektra was quite nice to all of us after we arrived, but I remained apprehensive. George's brother lived in the villa and looked after her like a servant. He took care of the farm and manufactured the cosmetics in a basement lab in the villa. He drove us to the beaches outside Athens when he had a chance, but most of the time we took the crowded buses.

After we stayed in Athens for three weeks, George insisted on taking a boat to Crete to relax in the resort of Aghios Nikolaos and to see the palace of Knossos.

In the morning, as we drove to Pireaus to find our boat, I noticed that Karin looked dreadful. She had shadows under her eyes and looked as if she was in extreme emotional pain. She refused to speak.

When we were alone on the boat, I asked her, "What on earth is going on with you? You look awful."

"When I went to say goodnight to Grandma last night she asked me why I don't love her and then she told me that I am a terrible

grandchild. She said I will never amount to anything much and that I will never become nearly as great as she is." Her shoulders heaved and she sobbed and I put my arms around her. She caught her breath and stammered, "She also said that she started university when she was 14 years old. 'You are 14 and what are you doing?' she said. I didn't sleep at all last night." She clutched at her stomach and doubled over with pain.

"Don't listen to that monster," I told her forcefully, but I was furious and heartbroken at the same time. George was proud of Karin's good marks at school, told Elektra about it, and this was the result. She was even jealous of her own grandchild.

"That's not all that happened to me. Dad yelled at me on the deck a few minutes ago and said that Grandma is going to disinherit him because I am such a horrible and ungrateful grandchild." Karin couldn't speak anymore. She broke down and sobbed uncontrollably and her face became purplish red and swollen and she gasped desperately for air. I glanced occasionally at the amethyst-blue sea and its silvery white, frothy icing and at the brownish orange seaweed streaming past the swift boat. The sea's perfume was seductive, but why did this supernaturally beautiful place impose such monstrous grief upon us? Was there a tragic spirit hovering in the air? Was this why the ancients wrote the most shocking tragedies here? But tragedies happened everywhere.

Elektra now tried to ruin our family by driving a wedge between George and Karin and I felt deeply sorry for both of them because they were singed by the fiery breath of the dragon. I gazed at the sea and prayed to Poseidon that my curse on Elektra would work.

I felt sorry for George, but I was also furious with him for yelling at Karin and for not confronting Elektra about her vitriolic and abusive behavior. Karin did not deserve all this madness.

George was standing on the highest deck and gripping the rail with both hands and his face was contorted in an expression of anguish and bitterness. "How dare you yell at Karin? She's suffering horribly. And what kind of a woman is your mother? If my brother were here he'd beat her to a pulp. Can't you ever stand up to her?

What kind of a man are you?" I shook my fist in his face and hissed with rage.

"Leave me alone," he said defiantly.

"No!" I grabbed his left arm and shook it.

He pointed to a pair of graceful dolphins that jumped through the surface of the choppy sea and leaped in the air for a few seconds. "Aren't they lovely? The ancients made beautiful paintings of them," he said.

"So what! Don't try to distract me. You better answer my questions." I glared at him.

"Forget about my mother. You don't understand extrovert Mediterranean behavior. She just blew up and now it's over." He spoke rapidly and gestured wildly with his arms.

"Her behavior is plain cruel and she's trying to ruin our family," I shouted.

Then he pointed to a small, desolate rocky island close to the boat. "There are thousands of these uninhabited islands throughout the Aegean. Only birds live there." He smiled wanly.

"You better talk to Karin and try to calm her down," I said forcefully. Now the boat rocked from side to side as we headed out to the open sea and the strong vibrations of the engines made my teeth chatter. The smell of putrid machine oil made me a little nauseous.

"I'll talk to her later," he said as he gazed at the rusty red island. "You know how much I care about both of you." He put his arm around me. I wished I could believe him.

Karin calmed down a little after George talked to her and once we arrived in Crete she was distracted enough by the sunny beaches and the fascinating palace of Knossos to suppress thoughts about Elektra. But I knew she would never forget this insult and I worried about our family unity.

A week after we returned from Crete, George's best friend invited us to have dinner at Lagonissi, a resort hotel south of Athens and half way toward Sounion.

We had dinner in a seaside restaurant that was situated on a rocky promontory and had a panoramic view of the dark turquoise sea and dusty purple islands in the far distance.

George's friend gave up his job as the head of the economics department at Berkley University in California to come back to Greece and work as a minister for his father, who was the present prime minister of the country.

I was struck by his beautiful wife, who was a tall, willowy blonde American woman. Her Greek mother-in-law was a petite lady who sat beside her and treated her with obvious affection and respect.

I questioned George about their relationship on the way back to Elektra's villa and he admitted that his friend's wife was adored by the prime minister and by his wife. "His mother is a very mild person. I'm sorry my own mother has an opposite personality, but there's nothing we can do about it."

How I envied his friend's wife! Life would have been infinitely nicer if I would have had a mild mother-in-law.

After we returned to Vancouver, George behaved cruelly toward Karin. He yelled at her and criticized her continually. I bristled at the abrupt change in his behavior toward her, but I knew the reason for it. He also raised his voice frequently when he spoke to me. I silently cursed Elektra again. When would her hypnotic power end? Deep down, George really did care for us.

He saw many of his childhood friends returning to Greece after living in America for many years and finding prestigious government and academic positions and he became more and more restless. "I want to return to Athens, find a professorship at the medical school and help to establish scientific research there. I have had this dream for years. There is not enough money in Greece for much research and I want to use my expertise to change all that and stimulate productive research."

I wouldn't have minded living in Greece, but I dreaded moving closer to Elektra. What would happen if George found a professorship there? What would happen to Karin?

George flew to Greece frequently to look for a professorship there and every time he returned to us he was tainted by Elektra's treacherous influence. It always took several days for him to return to his more affectionate self.

We finally bought a house in 1968. It was very close to the university and was a split level home with a double size lot. At first I cringed at the amount of garden work I had to do here, but I soon realized that it had great therapeutic value.

Karin started studying at UBC in September of 1969, and George continued his teaching, research, and the search for a professorship in Athens. He assured me that if he found a job there we would live in our own house, but I still worried very much about Karin because she didn't know enough of the language to study at a university there or to find a good job. I wanted to stay close to her until she finished her education and got settled. Even after that I wanted to be close to her and to be able to see her very frequently because I was deeply attached to her and I knew that that would never change.

The garden was enormous and I spent as many hours as possible in it whenever the torrential downpours ceased to try to suppress my anxiety about the future. I bought huge bags of peat moss and fertilizer to spread on the yellow lawn in the hope that this would bring it back to life and wore a faded, old blue mohair coat and pushed the wheelbarrow all around the garden. When Karin walked back from her classes she stopped to look at me and laughed. "Your face is all green, Mum."

I laughed softly. "It's the peat moss." The wet earth aroma from the compost box calmed me.

I planted spruce trees to break the monotony of the back lawn and grew dahlias of all colors that became taller than I was. I learned how to prune roses; my favorite was the Queen Elizabeth pink. I experimented with a vegetable patch and grew tomatoes, cucumbers and squash and I made apple and pear preserves and ended up with so many jars that I had to give many away to friends and neighbors.

George was too busy to do manual work around the house, so I climbed up on the roof and scraped off the droppings of the raccoons who visited us at night. I cleaned drain pipes, scraped and painted the trellis that supported a large grape vine and even painted the whole house inside and out. The neighbors stared at me in amazement and told me that I was going to hurt my back. "You work far too hard, Sonya. Tell George to hire men to do those things," they said.

"George tries to save money and I enjoy the work," I said. Mother's advice about working until your body ached was still very valuable.

I visited the new president of the Estonian community in Vancouver frequently and invited him and his wife to our home whenever George was out of town at one of his endless conferences.

The president assured me that it was still frightfully dangerous to visit Estonia. One man there had a visit from a relative in Sweden and the spies got suspicious and sent him back to Siberia. Another was in a similar situation and hanged himself in his bathroom before they could send him anywhere. I couldn't imagine putting my relatives in a precarious position like that, but I desperately wanted to see them. But what if I would visit and then not be able to get out?

At least I could send parcels to them now from a small outlet in east Vancouver which was apparently run by Estonian communists. Lara begged me for dark blue wool so that she could make a coat for herself. Exorbitantly high duties were charged on all outgoing parcels, but I had no choice because the regular post office was not reliable when it came to sending parcels to the Soviet Union.

I dreamt of the day when I would be able to visit my family without fear and I did not give up hope of meeting Mother in Helsinki before visiting Estonia. She was bound to get a visiting visa eventually, wasn't she?

Karin graduated from UBC in 1973 with a bachelor of arts and then decided to study classical music, but Elektra was furious and wrote to George that she should have studied medicine to return to Athens to help her with the cosmetics business. Karin said she couldn't imagine anything more boring than sitting all day in a so-called clinic (she couldn't believe that Elektra was a real doctor) and selling creams and lotions and she also hated Elektra and didn't even want to visit Greece for a very long time. Naturally, this caused friction between George and Karin.

George was quite nice to us when he was not under Elektra's influence and I kept hoping that he would become even nicer when she became older and weaker.

Chapter Fifteen

It was a cool and windy day in early March of 1976, but I enjoyed working in the garden because there was a little bit of sun struggling to emerge through the thick, dark clouds.

George did not find a professorship in Athens and he was told that the reason he was rejected was because he was too well known as a scientist and would have overshadowed everyone in the medical school there. He was devastated because he wanted so much to help to modernize the country and couldn't accept the fact that jealousy often overrides reason. I was temporarily relieved, but he was still very restless and I was sure he would try to find another job somewhere else because he often complained about the highly political atmosphere at UBC.

Karin, who was almost finished with her degree in music and was still living at home because it was so convenient, burst out of the kitchen door and ran over to me. "Mum, phone for you. It's a woman called Hilde."

"Hilde! Are you sure?" I put my weeding tools down.

"Yes! I'm sure." Karin smiled and nodded vigorously.

"Tell her I'll be right in," I said. Karin ran back and I took my garden gloves off, walked to the kitchen, washed my hands and then picked up the phone.

"Hello?" I was very excited.

"Is this Sonya?" I heard a deep, energetic voice.

"Yes!"

"This is Hilde." She spoke rapidly.

"My daughter told me, but I could hardly believe it," I said and laughed nervously.

"Believe it. I looked your husband's name up in the phone book and took a chance." She laughed heartily.

"I'm so glad you did. Where are you?" I spoke quickly.

"I live in the West End now."

"Can you come and see me? Would you like me to visit you? What's your address?" I got the pencil and notepad ready.

"Can I come and see you now?" She sounded very eager.

"Of course! I can't wait." I gave her the address and the directions.

She arrived at my door an hour later with a bright mix of cut flowers and we both laughed explosively and hugged each other the way we did at the YMCA in Montreal.

"Come in, come in!" I led her to the long, narrow living room that overlooked the huge garden.

"Oh, my God. What a fantastic place you have," she said and grinned. She was still vivacious and infectiously cheerful, like a child who had a lot of money to spend in a toy store.

"You haven't changed," I told her as I shook her shoulders affectionately. We sat down on a couch. "Are you married now?"

"Yes. I met an Estonian man in Toronto and lived there for a few years, but we got fed up of the damn snow and came here last year. Shit, I can't stand snow anymore," she grimaced and shook her head vigorously.

"What does he do?" I smiled at her.

"He works as a radio operator in a deep sea boat and he is away a lot. That's one reason I married him." She burst out laughing and so did I. "Guess what?" She held my arm.

"What?" I felt like an excited child again.

"My husband and I are going to visit Estonia this summer. For the first time since the war." She lit a cigarette and took a deep drag and I looked at her with disbelief and fascination.

"You've got the nerve to go there?" I gasped.

"Oh, yes, because my husband's father and brother were both shot by the Nazis and I have old school buddies working high up in the present government. One of them is an old flame," she said as she winked at me and nudged my arm. I laughed.

"Won't your husband find out about the old flame?"

"He won't. He's too dull-witted. And even if he does, who cares?" She nearly fell off the couch laughing and began to cough because of the cigarette smoke. I coughed also and shook with laughter.

When I calmed down, I asked her, "Would you be able to give some small presents to a few relatives of mine?"

"Of course. I'd be delighted. I remember your sister well."

"Thank you so much. Just a little jewelry like cufflinks for Lara's son and earrings for Lara. Nothing heavy. When are you leaving?"

"Early June." She grinned like a Cheshire cat.

"I wish you luck," I said.

She stayed for almost two hours, we conversed about mutual friends and acquaintances and we promised never to lose touch with each other again.

Karin and I visited Hilde and her husband in their sixth floor West End apartment, which was in a tall block not too far from Stanley Park and the ocean, when they returned from Estonia.

Hilde's husband was a typical stocky, energetic Estonian who seemed to have the same childlike fearlessness and optimism that Hilde had. As soon as he saw us, he said in a deep, strong voice, "I will pour you a stiff drink. You'll need it when we tell you our story." He had a pleasant ruddy complexion, blond hair and sky blue eyes.

He brought us a tray and offered us double vodkas with raspberry juice. "*Prosit!* To Free Estonia!" We all cheered and raised our glasses.

"This sure is good," Karin said and smacked her lips.

Hilde began, "Russkie soldiers with machine guns took away our passports in the Tallinn harbor and told us we would only get them back on the day of our departure." Karin and I gasped.

Hilde's husband continued, "They tore our luggage apart looking for valuables. I was scared shitless because I was wearing a wide cloth belt full of gold coins under my trousers." His voice boomed.

"Gold coins!" I exclaimed.

"Yes! I wanted to sell them on the black market and give the money to my relatives." He chuckled.

"Did they search you personally?" I asked with alarm.

"No, but I saw them searching other tourists."

Hilde said, "Some ladies were taken into the bathroom by giant Russkie policewomen and you can imagine what went on in there." She finished the rest of her drink in one gulp and I marveled at the courage these two had. Then she smiled and lit a cigarette. "But when we arrived at the hotel, oi, yoi, yoi, we saw more soldiers with machine guns. And when we got up to the tenth floor, we saw guards with machine guns standing at either end of the hall." She blew smoke in the air vigorously.

"The hotel is only two blocks from the harbor. It's one of the few places where tourists can stay," her husband said.

Hilde continued, "When we went into our room, we looked around for microphones and found them placed here and there. Whenever we wanted to say something important, we went into the bathroom and let the water run full blast."

"I sold my coins on the black market close to the hotel. Got good money for them, too," her husband said triumphantly. "My relatives could eat for half-a-year with that money." Karin and I stared at both of them in amazement. "But moving around the countryside is just as difficult. Soldiers and police are everywhere. The whole country is a police state," he hollered and shook his fist in the air. "For centuries we were under the Germans and now we have the Russkies. Everybody wants to own our little country." He made sweeping gestures with his arms.

"Oh, I saw your sister," Hilde said. "She looks good and was very happy to get your presents. She thanks you very much."

"Thank you for doing that. I hope it wasn't too much trouble," I said and touched her arm. I wanted to cry, but I controlled myself. I couldn't wait for the day when I would be able to give presents to my family in person.

Karin and I enjoyed our visit and stayed for a couple of hours.

It was an unusually warm day in the middle of July, and I ran back and forth in the garden with the sprinkler in a futile attempt to bring the lawn back to life. It didn't take much sun to turn our grass into brittle yellow straw.

When I went into the kitchen to get a glass of water, I felt an excruciating pain in my back and my legs began to cramp so badly that I could hardly walk. I screamed and clutched at the counter next to the phone. George was away and Karin was out. I had to stand because the pain intensified unbearably when I tried to sit down. With superhuman effort I called our doctor. "That sounds like a ruptured disk. You better get here right away," he said.

I called a taxi and struggled to get into the cab.

X-rays were taken and it was confirmed that I had a ruptured disk. The doctor gave me valium and told me to lie down on a very hard surface and to do special stretching exercises.

I put a sleeping bag on the floor at night and got some relief. What next, I wondered. I felt that Mother was trying to tell me something.

The next morning, Karin brought a letter from Estonia to my room. I struggled to get up from the floor, opened the envelope and saw a letter from Lara that had a black cross drawn in the upper left corner. Oh, no.

I didn't know if I had the courage to read and I took many deep breaths and tried to steady my hands.

Mother was dead of heart failure at the age of 88. I dropped the letter on the floor and moaned.

Karin rushed back into the room. "What's wrong, Mum?" There was an urgency in her voice.

"My mother died," I whimpered.

Karin rushed out of the room and returned a few minutes later with a vase full of red hedge roses. "Here, Mum." She put her arms around me. "I wish I could do more for you," she said softly.

"Thank you," I whispered. I wiped the tears with my dressing gown sleeve and put one arm around Karin's waist, we stayed silent for a few minutes.

When I recovered enough to be able to speak, I told Karin, "What makes it even worse is that Mother desperately wanted to go to Helsinki in June to meet me there. The bloody Soviets again denied her the visa, using the 'security risk' excuse again."

"Ugh!" Karin shouted. "How repulsive. An 88-year-old woman is a threat to their regime?" She scowled. "Another wonderful grandparent I could never meet, all because of insane politicians." She walked away.

I stayed in the sleeping bag on the floor for the rest of the day and looked at the funeral pictures over and over again. "I want to go home," I whispered.

A couple of weeks later I received another letter from Lara. She wrote that Adam committed suicide by breathing carbon monoxide in a closed garage and was found on the floor with his head next to his car's exhaust pipe. Apparently he visited her the day before he died and asked about me. I doubted his soul would ever find serenity.

Chapter Sixteen

As if the shock of Mother's death would not be enough this summer, George told me he was looking for a professorship in the United States. Even if we would have moved to paradise, I would have found the change difficult because I was 55 years old and craved stability more than anything. I had had enough of the gypsyish lifestyle.

He stormed into the kitchen one sunny day in early August and banged his fist on the counter, "Goddammit, I helped to put this medical school on the world map by doing world class research and now Ottawa rewards me by denying me research funds." He downed half a cup of scalding coffee at once. "I still have hundreds of ideas for research and I'm not going to stop now," he shouted at an imaginary bureaucrat. I empathized with his plight and was proud of his international reputation as a pioneer in the field of heart disease, but I dreaded moving anywhere.

At the end of August, George was appointed as a full professor in a new medical school in the city of Shreveport in northern Louisiana and he was elated: "They're giving me a very high salary and unlimited research funds with a full-time technician. These are dream conditions for any scientist." He smiled radiantly.

"What is the climate like down there?"

"Oh, beautiful and sunny most of the time. I enjoyed my visit there very much. The head of the department is ideal, he respects me and promises to let me do what I want. People are friendly and there are many aristocratic mansions. We may even move into one."

He put his arm around me. "Don't worry, everything will be fine. You'll make new friends and the sun will be good for your rheumatism." He sounded very convincing, even when I first met him I realized that he had tremendous powers of persuasion.

Karin was 25 years old now and wanted to take a year off to work in an office before going to graduate school in the States. I imagined that a major move wouldn't have affected her so much now as it would have a few years ago, and I hoped that she could visit us frequently. I didn't ever want to be separated from her for too long.

We arrived in Shreveport in October and soon moved into a modest ranch house in a pleasant neighborhood lined with enormous live oak trees. George said we would look for a mansion later.

There were no mountains anywhere and he told me that this was because we lived on land deposited by the Mississippi River over millions of years. I enjoyed the contrast of the warm, rusty orange clay against the bright green of the thick pine trees. Even now the temperature was much higher than in Vancouver and the sun soothed my aching body.

We drove around the city and I was impressed by the large number of palatial mansions that looked like combinations of Georgian manors and Greek temples. Many of them had circular driveways lined with giant magnolia trees with waxy, dark green leaves and huge live oaks. Would we really move into one of these eventually?

I met my neighbors and some of the faculty wives and made some new acquaintances that helped me overcome the initial shock of moving to a totally new environment, but I still missed my old Vancouver friends and wrote to them frequently.

In June of 1977, George bought me a plane ticket to Athens. "My mother is too weak to cause trouble for you and the trip will do you good. You can swim every day at your favorite beaches," he said cheerfully.

"Thank you. I haven't been to Greece since 1965." I smiled wryly.

"I would come with you, but I have summer students this year. I still love you, you know." I laughed softly. Elektra was getting quite old and her influence was waning now.

I consented to go and arrived in Athens one oppressively hot afternoon in the middle of June. George's brother picked me up at the airport and was quite subdued. He didn't speak much on the way to the villa. That was strange, what was going on now? Maybe I should not have come here.

He unlocked the massive front door and led me through the first Arabian archway into the formal living room. Elektra sat on a couch and her eyes were closed. Was she taking a nap in the middle of the day? "Hello, Mother," I said.

"What? Who is that?" She sounded apprehensive, but she didn't open her eyes. I walked over to her and held her hand.

"It's me. Sonya. Didn't you know I was coming?" I was concerned, she was very thin and looked like a wizened gnome.

"Sonya. Yes. My son told me." She faced me, but still didn't open her eyes.

George's brother tapped me on the right shoulder and pulled me aside gently. "She is totally blind," he whispered.

"Oh, my God," I whispered. Hot tears flowed down my cheeks in spite of the fact that I had cursed her many years ago and told her she would become blind.

I felt another tap on my shoulder. I turned sharply to my left and saw my favorite servant, the one who always wore black. We embraced silently for a long time before she pulled me aside and whispered to me that Elektra had been blind for four years. I was shocked, George never told me. Then she told me that she was Elektra's first cousin and that Elektra had tried to hide this from everyone all these years because she was so poor. I stared at her and gasped.

I was alone with Elektra now and she held my hand and whimpered, "Why am I blind? I haven't done anything wrong. I am a good person."

"No, you haven't done anything wrong," I said quietly and shook my head slowly. *No, you just ruined the lives of all those around you and you won't admit it,* I thought. But I didn't have the heart to criticize her now and make her suffer even more.

Much later, when it was time to go upstairs for the night, I offered to help her get to her bedroom, but she refused my help and cried out in terror for George's brother.

Her son began to help her up the stairs and he stayed on her right. I looked on the greying wall to the left and saw dark handprints making a pattern all the way up to the landing. They were evidence of Elektra's desperate attempts to keep her balance as she climbed the stairs. She was so proud of her villa, but she could no longer see it. And she thought that I would push her down the stairs. Deep down, she knew what she had done all these years. I was sure of that.

Elektra died of pneumonia in February of 1978. The stone villa was falling apart and was not warm enough in the winter because heating oil was outrageously expensive in Greece.

George and his brother shared her property and paid very high inheritance taxes on it.

As soon as his mother died, George became more affectionate toward me. One spring day in 1981 he said, "I am invited to a conference in Leipzig. You can come with me this time and maybe we can make a side trip to Tallinn. Once you are already in the U.S.S.R. on official business it is easier to travel to another part of it." He sounded enthusiastic and optimistic.

"It won't be easy to go to Tallinn. I hear from other Estonians that the Soviets ask detailed questions about relatives on the visa forms. I'm not going to betray my people to spies," I said forcefully.

"Well, let's at least try. Your friend Hilde went," he said rapidly.

"She and her husband had connections in the government. I certainly don't have them and my brother was in Siberia. But we can see what the forms look like." I shrugged my shoulders in a gesture of futility.

When the visa forms arrived at the house a few weeks later, I saw what I expected to see, the Soviets wanted to know the names, addresses and phone numbers of all my living relatives in Estonia, business as well as residential information was required.

"I will not fill out this form," I said stubbornly.

"But you are exaggerating the danger. We are in the '80s now and Stalin's reign of terror is over. Many Westerners visit the U.S.S.R. now without trouble." He showed me a newspaper that had an article about an American who returned safely from Russia.

"Those visitors don't have relatives there and they were not personally involved in wars and revolutions. You have no idea what a class hatred there was and still is in my country. Why do you think my old friends like Evald, Greta, Inge and Wanda have not attempted to visit yet?" I raised my voice to make my point.

He sighed. "Well, at least come to Leipzig with me. Maybe you can phone your sister from there," he said and touched my arm affectionately.

"That's an idea. I think I'll do that," I said and smiled wanly. *We still can't phone Estonia from anywhere in North America,* I thought.

"You must," he said and kissed me on the cheek. I relived some of the tender moments from the beginning of our marriage. How much better it would have been all these years without Elektra's poisonous influence.

We arrived at the Frankfurt airport in June and rushed to catch a train to Leipzig.

There was no food or drink on this train and the hard wooden seats were so terribly uncomfortable I shifted in my seat a lot and often stood up to stretch.

When we reached the border between West and East Germany, the train stopped. "Great!" I said loudly and impatiently.

"Don't worry," George said.

"Right," I said and sighed vigorously.

Two tall and heavy ash blonde female guards with machine guns and German shepherds climbed into the train and walked down the hall. They checked every compartment. When they arrived at ours, they looked under the seats and poked the spaces with their guns. One of them looked imperiously and condescendingly at George and asked him for identification.

"I am invited to give a keynote address at a medical conference in Leipzig." He spoke German with confidence, but he fumbled in his

pocket for the papers they wanted. He was terribly annoyed and nervous because he was not used to this kind of arrogant behavior.

He finally handed over our passports and visas. "This is my wife and we are both Canadian citizens and permanent residents in the States." He raised his voice a little. The guards scrutinized the papers for a long time and the dogs got restless.

They gave the papers back without a word or a hint of a smile and then slowly walked away with the growling dogs.

George leaned toward me and said, "This kind of behavior is unheard of." He was very irritated.

"Ha. I'm used to it." I smiled wryly.

Leipzig's beauty was masked by grey grime because of decades of neglect under the communist regime. As we drove toward the hotel in a taxi, I saw many once-beautiful buildings that seemed to be crying out for help. The cabdriver told us he did not have enough money for pain killers and that he and his wife were in constant agony. I found some aspirin in my purse and gave it to him and he was so extremely grateful he offered to drive us around the city for free.

Right after we settled in our hotel room in the afternoon, I went down to the reception desk and asked about how to phone Tallinn. The clerk pointed toward a small, glass-enclosed room with special phones and told me to try from there.

I sat down beside one of the phones. Would Lara be there? What would she sound like? I had not heard her voice for decades. I connected with an operator and she told me to wait for a few minutes.

After five minutes I heard a woman's voice. "Yes?"

"Is this Lara?"

"Yes. Who is this?" She sounded suspicious.

"It's Sonya. How are you?"

"Good God. Are you here in Tallinn?" She sounded so hopeful.

"No. I'm in Leipzig." My voice dropped and cracked.

"Will you be coming to Tallinn soon?" She sounded even more hopeful and I couldn't bear it.

"Not this time. Another time." I sighed.

"Why not? We all miss you terribly. If you could get as far as Leipzig, why not Tallinn?" She sounded a little reproachful and I cringed. But how could I tell her that all the phones were bugged and that it was impossible to even write to her about the personal questions on the visa form? I had no way of telling her that I had very good reasons for not visiting Tallinn.

"I couldn't get the visas on time," I told her and tried to sound convincing. After all, this was very plausible.

"Oh." She sounded totally dejected.

"How is everyone?" My voice lightened a little.

"Harald and I enjoy our retirement and we spend a lot of time in our cabin by the sea. My son continues to teach at the university. Alex and Albert are still good friends and play violin duets occasionally." Alex! No one ever wrote about him, I was amazed he was still alive. A pang of nostalgia stabbed at my soul as I remembered the lilac hedge and how I danced and sang to Albert and Alex's gypsy music.

"I will write to you as soon as I get back to the States." I was glad she couldn't see my mournful face.

"I hope so. But it would have been wonderful to see you."

"Goodbye for now, Lara, goodbye for now." I felt like choking and I could no longer speak. I wasn't sure I should have called her at all.

I was so preoccupied with the phone call that I stumbled on the four steps that led up to the dining room. Maybe I should have filled out the visa forms and gone to Tallinn. No! The spies were still bloodthirsty. Why should I have given them the opportunity to feed on my innocent relatives?

Soon after we arrived back in Shreveport, Karin visited us and found a teaching job. I was delighted, but even she couldn't help me cope with the debilitating heat and humidity. As the years passed I felt myself becoming weaker and weaker physically.

It was July, 1985 and I was miserable because of the blast furnace-like heat and the 100 percent humidity. Our house did not have very effective air conditioning and even after I took a cold

shower I felt just as sticky and hot as before as soon as I stepped out of the bathroom. George was too busy with his teaching and research to think about looking for a mansion and he didn't suffer as much as I did because the hospital in which he worked had the best air conditioning possible as well as an effective dehumidifier.

I was exceptionally tired today, something was wrong. As I wiped myself with a towel after a shower I felt a lump sticking out of the right side of my neck. Suddenly I felt as if I was going to choke. I touched the lump gently with the tips of my fingers. It was about the size of half an egg. What was this? Definitely something sinister.

When George came home from work I showed him the lump and asked him what he thought about it. He examined it carefully and said, "You may have thyroid cancer." I gasped and fell into an armchair. Father's mother died of that after months of agony. I remembered so well how the relatives took turns looking after her, she couldn't even move in bed, so they wrapped her in sheets to be able to flip her over.

"You think so?" I whispered as I touched the lump.

"I'll make an appointment with a specialist at the hospital tomorrow," he said. "It needs immediate attention. By the way, that specialist is in another hospital on the other side of town." He looked very concerned.

I drove to the hospital alone and took the elevator to the third floor. A confused old man in a checkered housecoat and slippers wandered down the hall and dragged his I.V. behind him on the shiny floor. A young intern in a light green outfit hurried down the forbidding, antiseptic hall. I hoped I wouldn't end my days in a place like this.

I found the specialist's office and a nurse ushered me in and asked me to sit down. There was a pleasant smell of new furniture here.

The specialist came into the waiting room, introduced himself, examined me briefly in his office and then sent me down the hall for tests.

I drove back to the hospital the next day to find out about the results and I was so nervous I nearly crashed into another car on the way.

Soon after I sat down in his office the specialist touched the lump gently and said, "You have a large thyroid growth that seems to be benign, but it must me 'burned out' before it becomes malignant." I looked into his kind empathic eyes for support.

"It looks like it can be very uncomfortable," he said softly.

"It is. I often have trouble swallowing and I get a choking sensation." I trembled a little. What was going to happen?

"There is a relatively new treatment for your condition. You will come here three or four times, depending on how things go, and a highly trained technician will give you a solution of radioactive iodine." He gazed at me as if to gauge my reaction.

"When do I start the treatment?" I was hesitant and my throat was dry.

"The nurse will set up an appointment schedule, but I imagine the first dose will be about three days from now."

When I drove back to the hospital for the first treatment I had to stay on the ground floor and sat in a room that looked like a science fiction lab. I waited anxiously.

Presently, a technician dressed in white and wearing heavy gloves that looked like they could have been made out of asbestos approached me with a small canister that had a crooked straw sticking out of it. He sat down beside a long counter, placed the canister on it and asked me to sit beside him. "You really have to drink this?" He asked sheepishly.

"Apparently, yes." I shrugged my shoulders.

He slid the canister over to me gingerly and said, "Try to drink all of it. If you feel any peculiar sensations, stop drinking and tell me." He leaned back and stared at me.

I touched the canister gently, leaned over the straw and started to drink as the technician kept his distance and watched me as if I were one of the last members of a species that was near extinction. The liquid tasted sweetish and was rather pleasant. "This is not bad," I said.

He continued to stare at me in awe; he obviously feared the potency of this solution.

When I finished the liquid, I stood up and walked toward the door without feeling dizzy. "See you next time," he said as I waved at him.

One week later I went back for a second dose of the radioactive solution. This time I felt a little dizzy when I walked out of the hospital. Would I be safe on the road? Too bad George and Karin were both too busy to accompany me.

One week after that I arrived for my third dose. As soon as I started sipping I felt a little giddy and by the time I finished the whole portion I felt as if I had just downed a whole bottle of cheap whiskey on an empty stomach. "Are you all right?" The technician looked very concerned. "Do you have anyone to drive you home?"

"No, but I'll be all right in a few minutes." I didn't even convince myself when I said that.

The intense afternoon heat in the parking lot made me feel worse and I took many deep breaths and hoped the vertigo would pass. I staggered over to the car, got in, started the engine and left the lot.

There was a slaughterhouse about three blocks down the road from the hospital and as I approached it I remembered the odor of the cattle trains that were ready to abduct people from Kadri to Siberia. I couldn't drive further. I turned into a driveway, opened the door, leaned out and vomited. What a hellish feeling. Maybe the potion won't work, maybe my end is near, I thought.

A few days after the third dose I touched my neck and no longer felt a lump, I was greatly relieved, but I also wondered if the lump would return.

I visited the specialist again on the third floor of the hospital. He sent me down the hall for more tests and soon confirmed that the lump was gone. He looked at me over his glasses, "I'm glad I can stop worrying about you. That growth of yours was so unusual that I used the scans to teach my students about exceptional tumors. You don't mind, do you?" He smiled.

"Of course not. George would do the same thing," I said.

"You must have a lot of stress in your life," he said as he took his glasses off. "That's one factor that encourages these tumors to grow." He looked empathic again.

I smiled wryly. "I can't even begin to tell you how much stress I've had in my life."

"Make sure you keep in touch with me. I would like to check your thyroid again in six months. But if you see anything growing before that time, call me immediately."

"It looks like you saved my life. Thank you." I smiled. But what if the growth would return in a malignant form and kill me before I could visit Estonia? I dearly wanted to see my family and the estate once more before my death, but it was still too dangerous for me and for them. Would I ever return?

In 1987 Karin got a teaching job in southern California and I visited her occasionally and stayed in her house, a charming three bedroom rancher which had a large outdoor pool surrounded by cocoa palms and citrus trees. The dry desert air there helped me overcome the aches and pains that plagued me in the humid environment of Louisiana.

I visited Karin in April of 1989 and received a letter from Albert one windy, dry morning. I sat in the kitchen and studied the envelope: "My brother hasn't written to me since the war," I said as I sipped my morning coffee. "I wonder why he's writing now?"

"Didn't you tell me that last month your sister had stomach trouble?" Karin frowned slightly.

"Yes. He must be writing about her health," I said. I opened the envelope slowly and began to read. "Oh, no." I read on and supported my head with my right hand.

"What's wrong?" Karin asked sharply.

"My sister died of stomach cancer two weeks ago. She was only 77. She could have lived as long as my mother, but she was too frustrated. I was hoping to see her again. Damn this Cold War. Maybe I should have gone from Leipzig, no matter what. Now it's too late, dammit." My heart palpitated rapidly and erratically.

"But you were terrified, Mum, and you had good reasons to be. Who knows what the spies would have done." Karin sat down beside me and held my arm.

There were many funeral pictures. At least 20 relatives walked behind Lara's coffin and she was buried in the main cemetery of Tallinn beside her husband and his family. Her son looked devastated. One picture moved me beyond tears, it showed Alex's tall, handsome son playing his violin beside her grave.

Karin's eyes moistened. "We've got to go and see everyone," she said. "I have so many cousins close to my own age."

"I know. But when?" I gulped and sighed heavily.

"Didn't that clairvoyant in Germany tell you that you would return one day? Everything he told you has come true so far," she said with child-like enthusiasm and optimism.

"Let's wait and see," I said as I continued to study the pictures.

I flew back to Shreveport in June and told George about Lara's death and funeral. He tried to console me, "You may be able to visit soon. Things are changing there very rapidly."

One Fall day in 1990, George came home in a very enthusiastic mood. "Everyone is talking about 'glasnost' and 'perestroika' at work. Gorbachev's progressive ideas have revolutionized the old Soviet Union. What's going on there now is incredible." He showed me some newspapers. "Look at these articles." He was very excited. "These are written by Westerners who visited the Soviet Union and returned safely. If they could do it, you can do it." I looked at the papers. "Read these articles. Please. I'm willing to pay for your trip." He walked over to the liquor cabinet, poured us two topkas of Southern Comfort and brought them to the table. "Cheers! To your trip to Estonia."

"Cheers!" I said and we both laughed and finished the topkas.

"I'll have to call some of my friends to make sure it really is safe to go there," I said pensively.

"Do it, then, as soon as possible," he said emphatically.

I called Hilde in Vancouver, Greta in San Francisco and Inge and Wanda in New York and they all confirmed that it was now much safer to travel to Estonia. Greta's FBI agent husband knew what he was talking about. I would ask Karin to make travel arrangements for the two of us.

When the visa forms arrived from the travel agent's office in January 1991, I wrote the names of my parents in the section reserved for information on relatives and said that they were deceased and residing at the cemetery. I smiled to myself. *That's all they're getting out of me,* I thought.

Karin and I now had reservations to fly to Helsinki in early June. George wished he could have come, but he had other commitments. If I would have arrived there safely it would have been after an absence of 47 years, that's longer than some human lifetimes.

Chapter Seventeen

Karin and I flew out of Los Angeles with Finnair and arrived in Helsinki 14 hours later in the morning. We soon found a taxi and headed to a downtown hotel. I looked forward to resting for a couple of days there before taking the boat across the Gulf of Finland to Tallinn.

The hotel was modest and comfortable and I smiled when I saw the light birchwood walls in the lobby and heard the two ladies behind the reception desk converse in Finnish. I could understand almost every word because Finnish and Estonian are very similar languages, and this made me feel at home already. The restaurant was to my right and its glass entrance door was decorated by a life-size stained glass Viking woman created in brilliant blue, red, orange, yellow and green colors. "That's you, Mum," Karin said as she pointed to the door and nudged my arm playfully. I laughed.

We took an elevator up to the third floor and entered our room. There was a brick high school across the street and some 18th century style apartment buildings could be seen to the right of the school.

I was exhausted and fell asleep early, but I woke up at three in the morning, the whole room was lit up by pale yellow sunlight. Karin woke up a few minutes later and walked over to the window. I laughed softly and she turned around sharply. "You're awake, too?" she asked.

"Of course," I said.

"I can see everything clearly out there. I can't believe it," she said in amazement. "It's so exciting to be so far north."

"It's so good to be home. I used to ride my bike back to the estate from castle dance contests at three in the morning and didn't need lights. No one slept in the summer."

Karin spent the next day exploring the city and I just rested.

We took a taxi over to the harbor the next morning and I noticed several dark pink granite outcroppings that seemed to wedge themselves between the buildings. There were many ultra modern and stunning late Baroque buildings and the whole city was very clean.

After waiting in interminable and fatiguing lines, we pushed our way onto the huge boat and struggled to find a place to sit. The ship was full of Finns going to Tallinn for the weekend to have fun spending their valuable hard currency.

Karin rushed around to find us a proper place to sit while I just sat on my luggage. It was very hot on the main deck and everyone talked loudly. Too bad Finnair didn't go to Tallinn.

She came back soon and told me to follow her upstairs to the lounge. I groaned because my back ached. "It's lovely up there and there are lots of seats. Let's go before everyone gets the same idea," she said quickly.

I struggled up the stairs and we sat at a large, round table. The view was indeed lovely and there was a bar and a seven-piece folk orchestra. Karin got us soft drinks and a tall Finnish man stopped to talk to us. "Finn marks are worth a fortune in Russian roubles. I can buy four times as much vodka in Tallinn as I can here, hotels are much cheaper and food is dirt cheap." He grinned broadly.

The folk orchestra played dance music for the entire three hour duration of the crossing. I tapped my feet in time to the music and wondered if Albert still danced. Occasionally a funny black and yellow mynah bird in a big, gilded cage whistled loudly and said "Hello" in Estonian. Karin told me the bird belonged to the bartender.

We were approaching Tallinn. Karin ran out to the upper deck and then rushed back in. "I can make out some vague outlines of buildings. I'm so excited. Some of the family will be there waiting for us."

"I don't know if they'll be there because I only told them the day we were arriving. I didn't mention the time because I want to go to the hotel first and freshen up before I see anyone." I touched my hair.

"I'm sure they'll be there. This boat only goes back and forth once each day," Karin said and smiled.

I went out to the windy deck with her and saw the fairy tale skyline of Tallinn in the horizon. I recognized the tall, sharply pointed green spire of the Oleviste church and saw several medieval Danish towers with the reddish brown conical roofs. Could this be true? Was I really returning after 47 years? I left when I was 22 and returned when I was 69.

The ship came to a smooth stop and the captain asked everyone to clear the outside decks and remain inside until further notice.

Even from the inside we could clearly see menacing, dark grey Soviet gunboats surrounding us. We were advised to go down to the main deck and Karin picked up our one big luggage with her right arm and supported me with her left arm.

We arrived on the main deck and I sat on the luggage. It was oppressively hot now. "What's going on? I feel like fainting," I said as I tried to fan my face with my hand. There were so many people everywhere that there was hardly any standing room. I sighed impatiently.

"It can't be too long now," Karin said cheerfully.

A group of 15 giant Finnish men and women suddenly burst into song. Everyone else stopped talking and just listened to the energetic and beautiful harmonies. I thought of the recent Estonian Singing Revolution and of how heart-warming it was to see Nordic people supporting each other in times of crisis. My eyes moistened.

After waiting for one full hour in the harbor for the Soviet authorities to give permission for the passengers to disembark, I was desperate for some fresh air.

Karin supported me and carried the luggage as we made our way down the winding staircase toward the platform. Soviet guards with

red-trimmed hats walked around and carefully looked up at the passengers as they came down the stairs.

A porter spotted us immediately and offered to carry our luggage. His grin showed several rotten teeth and several gaps where teeth once were. Karin gave him an American 10 dollar bill and he stared at it in wide-eyed disbelief. He winked at us and his grin widened.

He led us through to the Customs and Passport Control area and flashed the bill at the officials. Our luggage was not opened and our passports were quickly stamped and returned to us. "Good thing you gave him 10 dollars," I told Karin.

"We're almost out, we're almost out," Karin whispered.

We passed through the automatic sliding doors and I saw three men immediately to my right who looked very familiar and who were holding bouquets of flowers. "Here they are," Karin said.

I stopped short when I realized that the dignified, silver-haired gentleman was my beloved brother. He passed his bouquet to me and shook my hand. We looked into each other's eyes for a few seconds and then we hugged without saying a word.

"Albert, I can't believe it," I whispered.

"My sister. It's been too long," he said quietly. We stood back and gazed at each other. He was still my handsome and noble-looking brother and he was still strong. I felt the power in his arms when he hugged me and his blue eyes gleamed with wisdom and kindness.

Karin accepted flowers from the two younger men and conversed a little in English with them. I recognized my sister's son, he was tall, thin and looked very much the distinguished professor of mathematics. "I left Estonia just before you were born. Now look at you," I said and laughed. He grinned shyly. "Your mother was pregnant when I left from this very harbor," I said as I shook his hand vigorously.

I turned to my brother's younger son. I stared at him in disbelief because he looked almost exactly like Father. "And you, you look like my father. You even have his reddish brown mustache," I said. He laughed softly. He even had his slender build and the same kind, grey eyes. He shook my hand warmly and nodded.

We walked over to my brother's son's car as he took many pictures of us holding our flowers and talking to Albert and Lara's son.

We drove to the nearby harborside hotel that Hilde and her husband stayed in many years before and the men carried the luggage and we took the elevator up to the ninth floor. I was pleasantly surprised to see that there were no armed guards anywhere in the hotel and that our room had a striking view of the harbor and of part of the medieval old town. We all stood by the window and admired the view.

Albert was anxious to take us to his house for supper and told me, "My wife and daughter have been cooking all day. You must come," He held my arm.

"Of course," I said and grinned. I held his arm also.

We drove through some industrial sections of modern Tallinn and then through some pleasant grasslands in the outskirts of the city. "Look, a stork," Karin said and pointed at the graceful white bird that glided across our path from one part of the field to another. I smiled, I didn't remember the last time I had seen a stork.

We arrived at the driveway of Albert's house and we got out of the car and I looked around and enjoyed the gentle, pastoral environment. Apple trees and lilac bushes lined the driveway all the way to the modest two floor house and two enormous black and white hairy dogs ran to greet us. They were so excited they nearly knocked me down and I laughed.

As we approached the house I saw my brother's wife, his older son, his daughter, his younger son's wife and three grandchildren. I recognized them from the pictures Lara sent. We shook hands and conversed a little as Albert sent the dogs around to the back of the house. "Go away, you muddy, wet dogs and leave your aunt Sonya alone," he said with a commanding voice.

We all gathered in the small dining room and Albert's older son poured everyone a small glass of straight vodka. *"Prosit!"* Everyone cheered at once. I downed my glass in one gulp and laughed like a child. All the relatives stared at me and smiled and no one said a word for at least one minute, emotions were too deep for words right now.

"It's wonderful to see you all," I said and broke the silence. Albert grabbed his harmonica and played rousing old Estonian folk tunes, with his free arm he grabbed me and led me in a dance around the dining room table. After a few minutes I sat down and he took Karin around the table a few times as I sang to the music. Then I remembered how Albert and I promised each other that we would dance and sing when we would meet after the war.

We dined on sour cream chicken and potatoes and cabbage in dill sauce. A carafe of vodka sat in the middle of the table next to a white wine bottle and there was plenty of homemade black bread on every plate. Every few minutes the men raised their vodka glasses and cheered.

After dinner Albert's older son spread a map out on the table and pointed to the location of the slave labor camp where Albert spent some time, it was north of the Arctic Circle and was not too far east of Finland.

"What exactly happened to you?" I could no longer contain my curiosity.

"I was wearing a German uniform when I was captured by the Russians. I had just managed to send you a letter. Did you ever receive it?" He looked at me eagerly.

"Yes! I got it in Breslau and I keep it in a photo album," I said and smiled.

"Well, after they captured me, they took me to a horribly dark prison in Czechoslovakia. I stayed there for one year and was then transferred to the Siberian labor camp you saw on the map. The conditions in the camp were frightful. We were fed only watery soup and moldy bread, but we had to get up at five in the morning every day to build more and more log cabins for the steady stream of newly arriving prisoners. Sometimes I had to help bury the stiff, frozen bodies of prisoners who collapsed. The boards on the floor of my own flimsy cabin did not join fully, so there was ice in the cracks between them. A fellow prisoner from Latvia felt sorry for me and sometimes hid some extra bread in his mattress for me." His eyes moistened.

"My God, that sounds like a description from *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* by Solzhenitsyn. I read that book and *The Gulag Archipelago* and shuddered to think that you might have gone through things like this. Evald wrote to me from Sweden and told me that you were in Siberia for a while. I've been terribly worried about that for years," I said. I poured myself more vodka and looked around the room, everyone stared at Albert and me with great curiosity.

"Anyway, the friendly Latvian also told me that some prisoners were receiving tiny amounts of money for their work but that many of them were near death from overwork and disease and would never be able to use it. He encouraged me to apply for the money and I eventually started receiving a pittance here and there."

"A Russian guard found out that I am a musician, so he lent me a small accordion. I sometimes entertained the guards and the prisoners in the evenings by playing all the folk songs I could remember, including the Russian songs our father used to sing." He started singing 'Katyusha' in a deep voice and I joined him. Everyone smiled at us and when we finished they all cheered and raised their glasses.

"I knew it. I often used to tell Karin that you probably survived the camp by making music for everyone. Russians become very sentimental when they hear their own music," I said. I translated everything to Karin and added, "The small accordion is the 'karmoska' I told you about."

"One of the pictures shows you sitting beside him when he's playing it," she said.

Albert continued, "I thought I was going to die of exhaustion after one year in that camp. But luckily for me, the head of the camp was still so elated about the victory of the Allies that he suddenly decided to release a few prisoners. He had enjoyed my music and realized that I am not a political type, so he let me go."

"Oh! So it was one year that you were in Siberia. Thank heaven for that. All these years I was under the impression that you were there for a much longer time," I said as I touched his arm gently.

"One year, thank God. Anyway, I took my pittance and the tiny Bible that Father had given me during the war and started walking

on the frozen wasteland toward the train station. I couldn't believe I was really free and kept looking back to see if anyone was following me."

"The train came after a couple of hours and I climbed up the steep stairs and sat on a hard wooden bench. As it pulled out of the station I was overwhelmed by an indescribably intense joy. But then I looked back in the direction of the camp and felt deeply sorry for those who had to stay behind. I knew most of them would die soon. I turned to the little Bible for solace." He got up from the table, walked over to a bookcase and came back with the tiny Bible. "I want you to have this," he said as he put it in my hands. "I became very religious in that camp."

"Thank you very much," I said as I looked inside and saw Father's signature on the inside front cover. I put the book in my purse.

"I changed trains in Leningrad and soon after I boarded the train for Kadri I fell into a deep sleep. I only woke up as we were nearing Kadri. I reached into my pocket and realized that my money was gone. Someone had stolen it. As happy as I was to get off the train in Estonia, I had no money to even buy a bus ticket to get back to the estate. I had to start walking all that distance toward our country house and my legs were dangerously weak and wobbly."

"I noticed a man riding in a horse-drawn cart and tried to 'flag him down' for a ride. As soon as he saw me his face became extremely fearful and he whipped his horse fiercely. He was far away in no time. I couldn't understand his behavior at first, but it eventually dawned on me that my Russian clothes must have scared the hell out of him. He was an Estonian farmer." Everyone burst out laughing and I translated everything quickly to Karin.

"Were you wearing one of those funny Russian fur hats with the big side flaps?" I shook with laughter.

"Yes! But I couldn't walk much longer, so I went up to the nearest farmhouse door and knocked. I spoke Estonian quickly as soon as the door opened so that the residents would not be frightened. Fortunately, they felt sorry for me and took me in. They fed me a

delicious meal, it was the best I had eaten in years. Then they let me sleep in a comfortable, warm bed for the night."

"The next morning I woke up and looked out of the big front window. People who looked like Father and Lara were sitting in an open horse carriage that was heading in the direction of Kadri. I did not call out to them because I was not entirely sure."

"I felt that I had recovered enough to be able to start walking home from the farmhouse. I thanked the owners profusely and left. As I approached our own house, my heart pounded so violently against my chest I thought I would choke. I knocked on the door and waited. Mother opened it and stared at me for a few seconds. She had not heard from me for over two years. When she recognized me she screamed for joy and hugged me. I saw a baby boy sitting beside her and then realized that this was Lara's son. I picked him up and held him close to me. Then I asked Mother about Father and Lara and she told me that they had gone to Kadri to buy supplies. So my eyes had not deceived me after all."

"When they returned they were also beyond themselves with excitement. After we all calmed down we wondered what had happened to you. We missed you so much."

"I was in Germany at the time and I couldn't even write to you because no letters went in or out of the U.S.S.R.," I said. Albert poured more vodka into my glass.

"To the family," we both cheered and then downed the topkas.

"By the way, do you still have that violin you made?" I looked at him eagerly.

"Yes. It's upstairs. I'll go and get it," he said as he left the table.

Karin held it when he returned and said, "It looks like an instrument you would buy in the best music store. Is this the one that survived the collapse of the country house at the estate?" She looked incredulous.

"That's the one," I told her. Suddenly I visualized the country house vividly, no one had the money to rebuild it, but it was my first and only true home. At least the land was not confiscated and I knew I wouldn't really feel that I was home until I saw it. But I didn't

know if I would be able to stand looking at the bare hill where the house once was.

Albert picked up the violin and played some folk songs and I sang along with him, the rest of the family was spellbound.

When he stopped playing, I asked him, "How was Mother's health before she died?"

"She lived with us here in this house. I wish she could have had a larger bedroom, but the Soviets have strict building codes and wouldn't let me build the kind of house I really wanted to build." He shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Do you know that just before she died she was still so strong that she could cut tall grass with a scythe?" He smiled and crinkles formed around his eyes.

"No! I'm much younger than she was at that time and I'm already a physical wreck. But she always was unusually strong," I said.

"One morning in July, when I was leaving for work, Mother called out after me and said, 'I'm going out also.' This sounded strange, so I called Lara in Tallinn and asked her to come out here. I waited for her and took her to Mother, whose feet were cold and numb by then. The numbness worked its way up her body and she died painlessly in just half an hour." His voice was soft and soothing and he looked so wise.

"I'm so glad she didn't suffer before the end," I said. *My beloved Mum. Your spirit still gives me courage. My wonderful Mum. Can you see us now? I am almost home. I wish you were here,* I thought.

Around midnight, Albert's younger son drove Karin and me back to the hotel and told us he would come to pick us up in the morning to show us some sights in the city. "I've never had so much vodka in my life," Karin said as she rested her head on my shoulder. "I don't know if I'll be in shape to go anywhere in the morning," she whispered.

I just laughed. "You'll make it. I just hope I can."

Albert's sons arrived early in the morning and were anxious to take us on a tour of the old town. We went down to the lobby with them and then got into the younger son's Volkswagen station wagon. I asked him how he could afford a car like that on a Soviet salary.

"I didn't have to pay for it. The Department of Agriculture lets me use it on the job. I am an agronomist and I move around the countryside helping to modernize our farming methods. The Soviet system is too backward and we're going to need a lot of help just to reach the standards the country had before you left, Aunt Sonya."

"Are any other countries helping you?" I was very proud of him.

"A few. Sweden promises to send us farm machines and we're getting technical help from Switzerland. We'll see how it goes," he said and stroked his mustache. Not only did he look like Father, but he had the same interests. I patted him on the back and he smiled at me with his kind, grey eyes.

In just a few minutes we reached the foot of Government Hill. We got out of the car and I saw enormous concrete blocks blocking the road that led up to the Toompea. The younger son pointed to the blocks and said, "We've placed them there to make it really difficult for Soviet tanks to crawl up to our Parliament buildings. Our own people have more power and representatives in the government now, but this little bit of freedom is always threatened by the Russians."

I gazed at the hill and saw our blue, black and white flag flying from the Pikk Hermann tower, tears spilled down my cheeks. At last. Our flag was flying again, but for how long? All the Soviets would have to do is sneeze and it would disappear again.

I looked at the concrete blocks. "What courage you all have," I said. Karin walked over with the two men and touched the blocks. She shook her head slowly in amazement. "A tiny country like this defying the Soviets. Imagine. And they're still occupied."

We drove a little further into the old town and stopped in front of an elegant neoclassical building that was sandwiched between two sturdy medieval stone buildings. A small Russian car was parked across the street and two grim-faced men wearing black leather jackets sat nervously in it and smoked incessantly. "Those men look like they're going to a funeral," Karin said.

The younger son laughed softly and pointed to the elegant building. "That is headquarters of the local KGB and the men in the car are spies. In the Soviet Union, all officials look like that."

Karin giggled. "Say, you really speak good English," she told him.

"Thank you. I've been taking evening classes," he said.

"Your Russian must be perfect," I said proudly.

"Oh, yes. We had it all through school. You can't get a good job without it," the older son said. He was very tall and strong, but he was soft-spoken, I thought of him as 'the friendly giant.'

We got in the car, drove a little further and stopped in front of a massive, stark grey building with a façade of poorly imitated Doric Greek columns. "Ugh! That style looks disgustingly out of place here," Karin said.

"I know. It's Stalinist architecture. Those monstrous buildings are all over the place, even in the countryside. I work in a building like that," the younger son said.

"They're real eyesores," the older son said.

Opposite the stark Stalinist building was a bronze statue of Lenin resting on a tall pedestal. 'The friendly giant' smiled wryly and said, "None of those things will be there for long. We've been toppling them one by one for weeks now."

"Jesus, that's really dangerous." I gasped and covered my mouth with my hand. "Are you personally involved with this?"

"Yes. But there are many of us and we work in the middle of the night," he said. His grin widened.

I was so happy to be back in Estonia, but I felt so sorry for these young people. They had tumultuous, uncertain lives and they had to be so brave to survive. I wondered if life was harder for the ones who fled or for the ones who stayed behind. In any case, it was tragically difficult to be Estonian.

The younger son parked the car close to the church of St. Nicholas and we got out and walked toward the preserved bomb site next to the church. There was a high chain link fence surrounding a deep pit filled with rubble and a large, prominent sign attached to the fence gave information about the March 9, 1944 bombing of Tallinn.

"The historical preservation society wants tourists to know about that senseless bombing, so it decided to keep this pit as a reminder," the younger son said as he pointed toward the fence.

"Ha! The society people should talk to me. On the night of the bombing I actually ran by this very church on the way over to our apartment." The two men stared at me for a few seconds and then stared at each other.

"You were on the streets that night?" They both asked slowly and deliberately. Their jaws dropped just a little.

"Oh, yes. I can even show you where some of the electrocuted and bombed bodies were laying. I had to walk over some of them in a hurry." I gazed at the cobblestone street lined with beautiful, pastel-colored Renaissance buildings. I was pleased to see that so much of the old town was slowly being restored to its former splendor now.

We walked over to the church of St. Nicholas and I admired the tall, curvy black steeple which contrasted sharply with the white building below. I sat at the base of a nearby monument because my back ached. "You go on inside," I told Karin. "It's a lovely place."

Karin went in with the two men while I just sat and enjoyed the Gothic atmosphere and watched the tourists take pictures of the medieval buildings.

After about 45 minutes, Karin rushed over to me. She looked radiant and spoke quickly. "I love it in there. A visiting Latvian organist played Bach, Mozart and some pieces by contemporary Baltic composers. The acoustics are phenomenal. And I also saw that Dance of Death mural you told me about. It's huge and the symbolism is so powerful. Those skeletons dancing around the royalty are amazing."

"I know. I didn't think about the symbolism so much when I was young, but I sure do now," I said and then laughed sarcastically. One thing I definitely knew now was that fate controls everything. No matter how hard you try to fight it, it decides what is going to happen to you. I was now sure that all my struggles were pre-planned by fate and it just laughed at me as I desperately tried to deny it and change its course. But at least now I had the strength to laugh back at it. I never knew I would have had to become monstrously strong in my life. I smiled at the sky and shook my fist in the air defiantly.

The two men drove us back to the hotel in the afternoon. "I'll call you this evening and we'll make plans for tomorrow," the younger son said.

"Thank you both so much," Karin and I said to both of them as we all shook hands.

We went up to our room and walked over to the window. "There's so much to see in the old town. I'd like to spend days in there," Karin said as she gazed at the view.

I lay down on the bed and stretched my legs. "I need to rest a little now."

"Of course. I'll sit by the window and read some of the pamphlets I picked up in town," Karin said. She was soon absorbed in her reading.

After about an hour we heard a soft, but insistent knock on our door. "Who could that be? The maid already did our room," Karin said apprehensively. She walked over to the door and opened it slightly. "Hilde! It's Hilde, Mum." She was very excited.

Hilde walked in with her brother and sister-in-law and I got up from the bed and laughed. "This is too much," I said. I hugged Hilde and then shook hands with her relatives. "Karin, please go downstairs and get us some drinks. We have to celebrate."

"All right, I'll be right back." She rushed out of the room.

"How did you find us?" I looked at her in amazement.

"I knew you were coming in June and I knew you would be staying in this hotel, so I asked my brother to bring me over." She grinned broadly.

"Is your husband in Estonia, too?"

"No, but he calls every day to tell me how much he misses me. If he only knew I came here to get a break from him for a while." She laughed mischievously and lit a cigarette.

Karin returned with some drinks on a tray and we all raised our glasses and cheered, "To Free Estonia."

"Shhh! I just remembered, the place is bugged," Karin said softly.

"Oh yeah," Hilde said and tried to suppress a laugh. "Things are changing here fast. Did you know that many of our Jews are returning to live in Tallinn now and that they are building their own high school?"

"No!" I was amazed. I remembered their frantic exodus long before I left the country.

"What does that tell you? Life is not as dangerous here anymore." She took a deep drag and sipped her drink. "But I wanted to take you upstairs to the 22nd floor for a drink and they wouldn't let me in. There's a gorgeous restaurant and bar up there, oi, yoi, yoi, the view is spectacular, but the Russkies keep it for themselves."

"What?" Karin and I both frowned.

"Russkie officers. Some of them live on the upper floors and the restaurant is reserved for them. The hotel management crowd tells the tourists it's for everyone, but it's not." She sighed and blew a lot of bluish grey smoke in the air.

"No wonder they wouldn't let me in up there," Karin said and curled her lip slightly. "I tried to make reservations for tomorrow and one woman barely opened the door and just glared at me and told me no tables are available."

Hilde and her relatives stayed for about an hour. "We have to take the bus back to Kadri now," she said. We hugged again and promised to meet in Vancouver soon. I smiled to myself as I thought of how she so often appeared when I least expected her.

The next afternoon Lara's son and Albert's older son drove us to the city's oldest cemetery to visit my sister's grave.

On the way over, we passed by a military encampment that was completely surrounded by vicious-looking barbed wire and had guards with machine guns standing in a tall watchtower. "Why don't these characters ever get the hell out of here?" I asked rhetorically and bit my lip.

"Because we have so much fertile land and year-round ice-free ports. They have a huge submarine base here. They use all our resources. We're their window to the West. There are many reasons, as I'm sure you know," Lara's son said with professorial precision.

"Oh, I know, but I hate it," I said and turned my head away from the encampment.

We stopped at the city cemetery and got out of the car. A lady vendor was selling flowers at the entrance and I bought a mix of coral and white roses. They were not expensive.

We walked along a winding, white stone path and passed by dark and light lilac bushes, their perfume already helped me forget the encampment. As we moved further into the cemetery, I saw moss-covered rocks artistically placed around the graves. We were now walking in a pleasant mixed forest.

Lara's son carried his own cut flowers and a small plastic rake and he looked pensive and very determined. When we arrived at the grave, he combed through the sand with his rake to recreate a special pattern in front of the tall grey headstone. "I do this every two weeks," he said softly.

I placed my flowers on the sand and then stood beside the headstone for a long time without saying a word. Albert's older son took a picture of Karin and me and the click of the camera was the only thing we heard. This was the most peaceful, serene place I had seen in decades. The barbed wire and machine guns seemed so far away now.

"You had to go so soon, so soon. If only you could have waited a little longer so I could have seen you once more," I whispered as I wept and touched the headstone. "At least you are resting in such a beautiful place." I wiped my eyes.

It was heart-warming to see that the young men continued the ancient Estonian tradition of regularly honoring the dead as if they were still alive.

We left the cemetery and drove toward the apartment block in which Lara's son grew up. "I used to visit your parents here often," I said as I looked into his pale blue eyes. He looked a lot like his father.

"Yes. The block next to ours was bombed and was never rebuilt," Lara's son said.

"I remember the bombing. I was visiting your parents when it happened," I said and smiled wanly.

He studied my face carefully. "The communists decided that our apartment was too big for one family, so we had to share it with

another married couple. My bedroom was given to these strangers and I was forced to sleep in the entrance hall. Whenever my mother wanted to cook she found the other lady in the kitchen. And you can imagine what it was like to share one bathroom," he said as he touched his glasses and shifted them a little.

"Incredible. How did you manage to become a math professor under these awful conditions? How could you study?"

"I stayed away at school as long as I could in the evenings and once I went to university I practically lived in the labs and the library," he said. I was amazed that there was no anger or resentment in his voice and I was even more amazed at what he accomplished in spite of almost insurmountable odds.

We drove back to the hotel and the men promised to call us soon to arrange more meetings.

When Karin and I entered our room we saw the chambermaid making up our beds. Karin soon went out for a walk and I talked to the maid. I wasn't sure exactly what to say to her because she might have been a Soviet spy or a local Estonian communist. She could also have been just a patriotic local Estonian who longed for political freedom and democracy, but I had to be careful. She could have harmed my family.

When she finished the beds she reached into a deep apron pocket and handed me some slim newspapers. She flashed a warm, knowing smile at me and quickly said, "Do you remember President Päts?"

"Of course. I was right here in Tallinn when Radio Free Estonia announced that he had been taken to Siberia. I've never heard anything about him since that day." I spoke freely because she looked like a good, sincere person.

"Look at the article in this paper," she whispered and looked toward the door. "It tells you what happened to him and to many other people. These are underground newspapers, so don't show them to the other maids. Some of them cannot be trusted."

"Thank you very much," I said. I grabbed my purse and gave her some money and she was overjoyed. I also gave her some of the flowers the men gave us when we arrived.

"Thank you! I hope I see you tomorrow," she said as she left the room with her gifts.

The article about Päts was ghoulish, apparently he was taken out of Kadriorg Palace and sent to a mental hospital in Siberia, where they gave him drugs to make him crazy. He died after a few months of 'treatment.' A nurse who was half Estonian and half Russian and who worked in this hospital tried to find out where Päts was buried, she had to be very careful not to appear too anxious or she would have been in serious trouble herself.

After one year she managed to find out that most Baltic prisoners were simply wrapped in linen and dumped in mass graves. Soon afterward she found out that Päts was also wrapped in linen, but was buried in a special place because he was the former president of Estonia.

This nurse convinced the Gorbachev government to allow the exhumation and transportation of the remains back to Tallinn. Estonians raised enough money to have his remains buried in a new cemetery in the city. I hoped his remains really were here. I planned to ask Albert about this the next day.

There were other articles about the endless deportations to Siberia of thousands of innocent women and children, about open pits near Tallinn that were full of nuclear waste, about mines still floating around in the Baltic Sea and about our beautiful seaside resort city of Narva being 90 percent Russian now.

I put the papers in my luggage and walked over to the window. A huge ferry from Sweden was gliding toward the dock. The busy harbor seemed to whisper about hope for a happier future here.

In the evening Karin and I went to the second floor of the hotel to have dinner and to watch the other tourists.

There were two big rooms with noisy slot machines and other facilities for gambling not too far from the restaurant. Two tall and heavy Finns staggered over to a green felt-covered table and began to play cards. They also ordered many drinks and the short slim bartender rushed to serve them so quickly that his movements looked blurry.

We were stunned to see dozens of heavily painted young women wearing expensive and highly provocative clothes, one tall, slim brunette with waist-long, thick hair wore a white satin jumpsuit and scarlet red stiletto heels. Who were these women? Could local girls really afford clothes like these? Were they making a movie?

The bartender hopped over to us and smiled slyly. "I can't help watching your faces as you look at them over there. They are prostitutes from Leningrad and their pimps ship them in to the hotel so they can catch tourists who pay with hard currency. Roubles are practically worthless, as I'm sure you have found out."We tried hard to suppress our laughter.

"They all look so serious, they really mean business," Karin smirked.

Much later, when we headed upstairs in one of the crowded elevators, we noticed many of the prostitutes getting off on the eighth floor with a tall, thin man dressed in a white suit who gave them sharp orders in Russian. "Looks like the pimp has reserved rooms for them right below us," I said to Karin. She turned her head away and shook with suppressed laughter. "He looks like a fuzzy old rabbit," I said softly.

Albert and his two sons came to pick us up the next morning. As we walked through the lobby I asked him about the burial of Päts in Tallinn and they all confirmed that his remains really were back in the city. "Yes, he is finally home," Albert said as he nodded his head slowly. "Now I would like to offer you lunch at my house and then we can meet Alex's family. Did you get the funeral pictures? Alex died just a couple of years ago."

"Yes, I got them. I saw the whole clan there," I said. Another relative who died too soon.

We drove to a huge apartment complex in the outskirts of town after lunch in the late afternoon. Five or six dreary, greyish white towers stood very close to each other and there were no trees or any other plants to break the monotony. "More examples of Soviet architecture," the younger son said and chuckled.

We climbed the stairs to the second floor of the first building and knocked on the first door to our right. A very tall, thin young man opened the door and greeted us warmly. "Come in," he said and motioned toward the living room.

I stared at him and smiled. "You are a copy of Alex. I can't believe it. Are you the older son?"

"Yes, that's me," he said and grinned shyly.

"I recognize you from the funeral pictures," Karin said as she shook his hand. "You are the one who played the violin beside the grave of my Mum's sister." He knew some English and he beamed with obvious pleasure.

"Yes. Music speaks when words fail," he said. He had Alex's humorous face and he was just as tall.

When we entered the living room, a robust older lady walked over to me. "Welcome! I am Alex's wife," she said and motioned toward the couch.

We sat next to each other as other family members and in-laws streamed into the room and sat down. Several conversations began all around me after the introductions were finished, and there were drinks and appetizers on a coffee table in front of the couch.

"Tell me about Alex and his family. My sister rarely wrote about them," I said to Alex's wife.

"Alex had been captured by the Russians and sent to a Siberian labor camp. He was there for 10 years."

"No!" I gasped and put my hand up to my mouth. "Evald wrote to me that he had been captured, but that's all he knew," I said.

She took a small photo album out of her purse and showed me pictures of Alex after he came back home. "At least that camp was not as harsh as the one where your brother was. It was deep in the interior of Siberia, but it was not above the Arctic Circle and the labor was not quite as back-breaking." She smiled.

"But it was still a camp and he was there for so long. And he managed to come back home, marry you, and have two healthy sons with you. That amazes me," I said.

"He and your brother were best friends to the end. They played violin duets even five years ago," she said and smiled radiantly. "Sometimes my older son over there would join them."

Now I visualized Albert and Alex playing on the music platform by the lilac hedge and I wondered if the platform was still there. Albert told me we were going to the estate the next day. I was happy and terrified at the same time because I knew I wouldn't really feel that I was home until I saw the estate.

"What about Uncle Thomas and his family? Are any of them still alive? Uncle Thomas's house was just over the hill from our house," I said. I was apprehensive because no one ever wrote about them.

She sighed, lowered her eyes and spoke softly. "One evening a traveler knocked on Thomas' door. He was nice enough to let him in and offer him food and lodging for the night. The traveler seemed to be a very sympathetic person, so Thomas opened up his heart and told him how horrible it was that the country had been taken over by communists."

"Early the next morning the police arrived and arrested Thomas, his wife and his daughter. They put them on a cattle train and sent them to Siberia. All three perished there."

I felt nauseated, I smelled the cattle trains and the manure mixed with human feces and I relived that ghastly day in Kadri. I breathed deeply. "That is too horrible for words," I whispered.

Then I remembered the German clairvoyant in Boden See who told me I would return to my homeland one day and an older lady would help to solve some of the mysteries of the past, so all his predictions came true.

She offered me a drink and some appetizers and tried to cheer me up. "You don't have to work very hard around here to get your paycheck. As long as you show up for work and be seen, that's what counts." She laughed and everyone else stopped talking and listened to her. "I know one man who didn't even have to do that. He arrived at his office in the morning, put his jacket on the back of his chair, and then left the building to do personal jobs. His fellow workers and his boss saw his jacket there every day and thought that he must

be an extremely hard worker, so they decided to give him a promotion. He got it. The jacket was moved to a desk on the upper floor and the man was informed of his promotion when he arrived at work the next morning."

Albert's younger son looked at me and Karin and said, "I'll bet you can't get away with things like that in America." He slapped his thigh and everyone laughed uproariously.

Alex's wife continued after she gulped down another drink. "I was a nurse at a nearby hospital for years. One cleaning lady used to arrive in the morning, punch in, and then go back home to make head cheese. Sometimes she came back to work after lunch and sometimes she didn't, but she got away with it every time."

Everyone exploded with laughter. So this was how they survived the oppressive conditions of life here—they had strong family loyalty, humor, and indomitable spirits. I was so happy for them, I had to be my own source of strength for decades.

Albert came with his younger son and grandson to the hotel the next morning. "We thought we would get an early start because there are many things to see and it takes close to two hours to get to Kadri from here," my brother said. He shook my hand affectionately and motioned for me and Karin to get into his son's Volkswagen.

Soon after we left the city we drove on a highway that was flanked by a thriving birch forest. I always admired the young, slender and flexible birches, according to Mother, they symbolized the fresh innocence of young brides. The Russians called them 'beryoshkas' and when I gazed at them I thought of my high school years and of how I wanted to become a character out of a Russian novel.

I felt more and more at home as we passed through the gentle, rolling hills that were punctuated by small lakes and ponds. There were many kinds of lilac bushes in full bloom and there were very few cars on the road. I noticed a few log homes nestled here and there in the mixed forest.

"What does the estate look like now? Lara wrote that many of our trees were cut down and taken to Russia," I said to my brother as my voice broke in mid sentence. I almost hated to hear his answer.

"They took a lot of them to build log homes for themselves, but some saplings are growing here and there. There are a few older trees left, but there are no traces of our house to be found because people who live in the area used the logs for firewood. But the outdoor cellar is still there. Remember the cellar? I used to practice my trumpet in there so Father wouldn't go crazy." He smiled at me warmly and I gazed at his finely sculptured features and his kind, wise eyes. I marveled at his stamina.

But the closer we got to the estate, the more apprehensive I felt.

After about an hour and a half of driving through the sparsely populated countryside, we turned off the main highway and eventually stopped at a crossroads. The younger son turned around and said, "Here we are, Aunt Sonya. The family cemetery is on the left and the estate is to the right just down that road over there." He pointed to the soft dirt road and smiled as if he knew how much the estate meant to me, he arched his eyebrows and waited patiently for me to speak.

But I couldn't speak. I just stared at the warm, rusty brown earth and the dark evergreens and bright green birches and felt the sun's warmth through the thin clouds. The road leading down the gentle slope to the estate seemed to reach out to me, it was whispering, "Come home, Sonya. You belong here."

Suddenly I felt the onset of a panic attack and I opened the door right beside me and breathed deeply, I could go no further. That estate was me, that was where my soul lived. It always had. If I would have gone there now and tried to face the destruction of the house and the thinned out forest I knew I would have had a heart attack and died on the spot.

When I recovered a little from the panic attack, I told my brother, "I cannot see the estate." I felt nauseated.

Albert told his son, "Let's drive down to the estate now. We can see the graves on the way back." He sounded insistent.

"No! I want to remember everything the way it was when I was young. I refuse to go there." I was just as insistent as he was.

Albert repeated his request to his son and then I raised my voice a little, "Do you want me to die? I know I will have a heart attack there.

If you insist on going, I will get out of the car right now." I put one foot on the ground and braced myself against the frame of the car.

"Your aunt will not go to the estate. Let's get out of the car here and visit the graves now," Albert said to his son. He knew there was no point in pushing me any further. He always understood me and I was grateful for that.

His son and grandson picked up four vases filled with flowers from the back of the station wagon and we all walked across the road to the forest cemetery.

Albert supported me on his arm and we walked to Mother's grave first. It was marked by a polished pink granite headstone with the name 'Lydia' inscribed on it. There was a small bench under a tall spruce nearby and I sat down to meditate while he stood beside me silently, the only thing I heard was a gentle breeze as it passed by and made the birch leaves shimmer.

I closed my eyes and tried to connect with Mother's spirit. *How I miss you all these years, how much I love you, I want to be buried close to you,* I thought.

Then I remembered the gypsy who told me I would never return to my home. She was wrong, this cemetery was close enough. Albert held my hand and gave me his handkerchief and I looked up at him and whispered, "I'm home. I'm finally home." I wiped away a few tears.

After a few more minutes of silence, we walked to Father's grave. Karin and Albert's grandson placed a vase in front of the granite headstone marked 'Karl'. *I'm back, Father. Remember how you couldn't say goodbye to me because I was your favorite child? Dear, dear Father,* I thought. I leaned on Albert's arm.

We walked over to our grandparents' graves and Albert's son took pictures of us. Albert pointed to a plot beside Father's and Mother's graves and said, "That one is reserved for me."

I smiled wanly. "How about one for me?"

"There's plenty of room here," he said softly.

We left the cemetery after about an hour and drove to an enormous Baroque castle where Albert and I won folk dance contests years ago.

We got out of the car and I walked to the edge of the nearby lake, the aroma of lilacs was intoxicating. I looked up at the medieval stone tower across from the small lake. "Say, that's the tower where Evald dressed up as a ghost and scared the girl so much she fell into the water." I laughed like a child.

"Yes, that's the one. And I was waiting down below with the others to help rescue her," Albert said and smiled. "By the way, Evald wrote to me that he's going to visit us next summer. It will be his first trip back after all these years."

"Oh, good. I'm sorry I'll miss him, though," I said.

Albert pointed at the luxurious castle that was painted in muted cream, dusty rose and pale mauve. "The Germans had used this castle as a field hospital and then destroyed the electrical system to make life harder for the Russians. My first job after I came back from Siberia was to rewire that whole building. I was paid very well."

"No wonder Lara sent me pictures of you sitting beside a television with your well-dressed kids. You had a T.V. before we did," I said playfully as I slapped him on the arm.

After the younger son took some pictures of us standing in front of the castle and the lake, we drove toward the small brick castle where I finished elementary school. I jumped out of the car, walked around the building, forgot about my aching back and stopped to look at the turret where my favorite teacher lived.

We drove toward Kadri and stopped for a minute at the edge of town, Albert pointed toward a cemetery. "Adam is buried there. I imagine you would like to walk over to his grave and spit on it." He pursed his lips.

I remained calm and said, "I don't want to bother. He was his own worst enemy and he will never find peace anyway." I gazed at the cemetery for a while and then turned to look at my brother. "I'm getting tired. Let's go back to your place now." He nodded in agreement.

We arrived at Albert's house in the late afternoon and the rest of the family and the two enormous dogs ran out to greet us. I was happy to be here, as exhilarating as it was to see my beloved coun-

tryside, all the vivid memories I had relived today exhausted me totally.

I also thought of the encampment and the machine gun-carrying guards I saw several days ago. I came home and I was elated in one sense, but also very disappointed because my country was still occupied. Wouldn't it be wonderful to return to a free Estonia? Was that too much to ask before my death?

We all sat around the dining room table and my brother poured some of his homemade blackberry liqueur into our glasses. *"Prosit!"* We cheered.

The rest of the family were anxious to hear about our day in the country, so I told them about some of my impressions and they listened attentively.

Then my brother impatiently patted me on the arm. "I have to tell you a story. Years ago, I had finished work at the castle for the day and began driving home over treacherously icy roads when I was flagged down by a Russian officer. I stopped immediately. He jumped into my car and commanded me to drive. I obeyed and watched him closely because he had a gun at his side."

"He soon pulled out a big, full bottle of vodka from his coat pocket and began to drink it as if it were water. Then he passed the bottle over to me and shouted, 'Drink!' I was already struggling to drive over the curvy, icy roads and didn't look forward to more danger. I glanced at him quickly and pointed to the road ahead to try to make him understand the danger. He didn't. He stared at me and shouted, 'You! Drink! Otherwizhe, you no my frend'. God only knows how much vodka he had already guzzled before I picked him up."

"I took the bottle and downed a lot of vodka while trying to steer the car. He grinned at me, took the bottle back, took another swig, and gave the bottle back to me. 'Your turn!' I took more and the bottle was soon finished."

"Then he grabbed his gun, shot randomly out of his window, and yelled 'oi, yoi, yoi'. Good thing no one else was around. I was not steering well by this time and was praying to make it home alive."

"To my horror, he pulled out another big full bottle of vodka from nowhere and started drinking again. 'Oi, yoi, yoi! Your turn, my friend!'. I took a swig and the car turned around full circle because I had stepped on the brakes too hard. The officer laughed hysterically and slapped me on the back. This made my head swim and I also started laughing hysterically."

"With superhuman effort, I managed to regain some control of the car. He then demanded to be let off at a bus stop close to my house. He stumbled out of the car, fired some more shots straight up in the air and gave me a military salute. I saluted him also and skidded off toward my house."

"I swayed with the car from side to side all the way up the driveway and then crashed into a snow bank. I fell out of the car door and then staggered toward the side door of the house in the hope of getting in unnoticed. But my wife was waiting at the door and screamed at me, 'You've been drinking!' I dragged myself to my room and collapsed on the bed without saying a word to her."

We all laughed heartily and I gently slapped my brother on the arm. "That's just the kind of story I needed to hear." I was so happy that his resilient spirit was not beaten out of him.

The next evening we went back to Albert's house to get ready for the annual midsummer celebration, his wife was already dressed in a brightly embroidered folk costume.

Albert's younger son drove us to a community center which was just a few blocks from the house. Before we even entered the main activity room I heard the folk orchestra playing a polka. I hummed to the music and made a few dance steps while holding on to my brother's arm. Lara's son was here tonight also and he was very amused at my exuberant behavior. It was good to see him in such a light-hearted mood.

There was a large stage at the far end of the activity room and the orchestra played from there. Many couples were already dancing and a few were wearing folk costumes. Albert's younger son danced with his sister and 'the friendly giant' asked Karin to dance.

Albert and I left the room and walked around outside. We needed some more time alone so that we could discuss everything, but we could still hear the cheerful music.

After about an hour, the others came out to join us and to watch the lighting of the gigantic woodpile that was set up in the middle of the forest clearing.

"Here they come," someone shouted. A medieval style horse-drawn cart full of children in folk costumes suddenly came into view on a curved path that emerged from the forest. The child sitting at the very front of the cart carried a burning torch and as soon as the cart stopped he jumped off and ran over to light the bonfire.

We all gazed in awe as the flames became stronger and brighter and the snapping and crackling sounds of the wood got louder. Dozens of adults and children joined hands and danced around the fire.

The wild flames spoke to me of hope for a free Estonia. Our ancient customs were still alive and our spirit still lived.

My brother and I sang folk songs in the car on the way back to his house.

I couldn't believe that we were leaving the next day.

In the morning, my brother came with his younger son and Lara's son to take us to the harbor.

Karin walked over to the ticket counter to obtain the boarding passes and Albert and I sat down on a bench. He was very subdued and looked at me wistfully. "Do you have to leave again?" he whispered.

"Only for a short time." I patted his hand. "I'll be back soon." I tried to sound cheerful, but I was also very sad. The 12-day-visit was too short and I wished I could have stayed with my brother forever.

The time came for Karin and me to go through the security gates and we all walked right up to the gates and then hugged in silence.

I turned around just before the automatic doors shut behind us and waved to the three men. They gazed wistfully at Karin and me to the very end. "We'll be back soon," we both said.

Epilogue

One Sahara-like August morning, soon after Karin and I arrived back in San Bernardino, we watched the CNN channel and were horrified to hear about the coup against Gorbachev. Soviet paratroopers landed close to Albert's house and the Tallinn harbor was blockaded.

A few days after the blockade, all three Baltic States took advantage of the confusion and instability in the Soviet Union by loudly advertising their plight in the United Nations building. Part of their problem had been a lack of publicity, but the world finally began to recognize their existence. Estonia reasserted its independence on August 20, 1991, and the Cold War was over. Karin and I were incredulous.

George had a massive stroke in February of 1993 and nearly died. Karin and I felt so terribly sorry for him that we couldn't bear the idea of abandoning him long enough to travel to Free Estonia.

In the summer of 1994 George insisted that we visit Estonia again, so we found a nurse to look after him and made reservations to fly to Tallinn in August.

Albert and the rest of the family members looked much happier and exuded a renewed dignity and self-confidence. They took us up to the 22nd floor of the same hotel we had stayed in the first time we visited. It was no longer restricted to Soviet officers. We drank champagne to celebrate our reunion and the country's independence.

A few days later, Karin and I had lunch in a medieval building that had huge tapestries depicting hunting scenes hanging on the rough and thick stone walls. We sat in massive throne-like chairs that braced themselves against the uneven flagstones on the floor. We were the only customers and we felt that we were in a cathedral.

I looked up at the enormous, multi-colored stained glass window that filtered the almost divine sunlight through the figures of two saints. God, or fate, or The Creator, if you really are there and if you can hear me, thank you for letting me come home once more, I prayed. I was finally back in Free Estonia and that meant that there was still hope for humanity.

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Crissa Constantine's story of bravery and determination will have you cheering the gallant efforts of a young woman forced to flee her homeland of Estonia during the Nazi invasion. Without warning, Sonya's young husband vanishes and she finds herself forced into sexual slavery. She's alone, scared and not sure where to go.

Her strength comes from her husband's love, and with the knowledge that he would have wanted her to go on with her life. Despite the troop of soldiers guarding the border, she manages to escape into Germany for temporary safety. After learning that she cannot go back to Estonia, she realizes she must move on. With only a few belongings, she immigrates to Canada where she begins a new life, remarries and starts a family. After many years, true happiness still eludes her for she cannot forget her homeland or the family she was forced to leave behind. Eventually, Sonya is able to return to Estonia to face old demons and visit her past. There, the past and present collide, freeing her to find what she so desperately has been searching for – inner peace.

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